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BACKWATERS

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

In

The Department of English

By
Tamika LaShon Edwards
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1997
May 2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In loving dedication to
my Mother, Olivia, my Earth Angel
and my Great Titi Mary,
my Guardian in the Great Beyond.

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ABSTRACT

Backwaters is a novel heavily steeped in the supernatural. It chronicles the lives of a mother and son who have been disconnected from one another through a series of curses. Unaware of the other-worldly forces propelling their lives into chaos, each loses themselves to madness and isolation. Their only escape is in loving others too hard, and not each other enough.

PROLOGUE

Funny. They thought his name would be more offensive, something more jagged than Acanthus C. Fontanbleu rolling off the tongue. They thought his name would match his face- both leaving the same twang that baking soda leaves in the back of the mouth, but only the face with the flaming eyes left the tart aftermath, the name however left something different-- something soft and sweet, even romantic (mad of course), but romantic all the same, like the names in white folks' tall tales about armed knights and handsome princes sacrificing for their fair maid milds....

Mrs. Abby Rubins

She had an obsession with hair-- that's how come the boy come out crazy just like her. The two used to keep to themselves real unnatural-like, combing in each others heads in private like it was something too dirty for other folks to see. I remember how they used to pull the shade in the morning time even before the sun got the notion to wake up. She'd be dressed in something soft and paper thin, and he in silk pajamas. Before I saw him in them things I ain't never knowed them to be made that small. Back then it was rare to see silk in a colored household, muchless on a colored boy-child. Even some white folks in Backwaters couldn't afford that luxury. But them two was strange that way, living as though they were royalty amidst the poverty in The Downs. Them two could barely afford a pot to piss in, but when it came to their hair, and putting clothes on their backs they spared no expense.

I can remember the one time they forgot to pull the shade. That was some sight to see. Of course, it wasn't my intention to stare. Usually by that time in the morning I'd be up in the kitchen putting some coffee on for me and my Clement. It had become a habit for me to just glance over expecting to see the dingy white shade pulled down just so, but that morning, weren't no dingy white showing, so I couldn't help but stare. And

that's when I saw him stroking her ginger colored cotton candy mass with that sterling silver brush-- the kind with the bristles made exclusively for white folks' hair. There she was sitting at her dresser mirror, and him behind her stroking like there weren't

no tomorrow, and her closing her eyes and moaning. With every pull and snag she'd let out this soft sound that seemed to me too intimate for a Mama to be sharing with her son. The sound seemed barely there, but I had good ears and I heard. I couldn't do nothing but stare and listen. It wasn't until the boy caught my eyes in the looking glass, and stopped his stroking that Dahlia opened her eyes. First she saw the alarm in his baby browns, then found the confusion in my own. Shame colored both of their faces in a bright, almost cherry red. I figured I had seen something I wasn't supposed to have seen, so I busied myself with the salt and peppershakers on the table, and pretended I hadn't seen a thing. But out the corner of my eye I could see her slowly stumbling towards the window to pull the shade. The boy hadn't moved an inch. I suppose he was still in shock.

Seem like it took forever for her to reach that shade- as though she was floating and falling all graceful-like at the same time. But that boy he couldn't move none. His eyes were too busy searching my face for forgiveness, even though by then I had turned my attention to the salt and peppershakers.

When she finally reached the window she ain't say a word to me, and I ain't say a word to her. She pulled the shade and ain't nobody see or hear from them two for a whole week. She thought seven days was long enough for me to forget, but it weren't. That episode was haunting me all in my conscience to the point where I couldn't even sleep at nights. That boy's baby browns was all I could think of-- them searching my face all over for forgiveness, and me looking away like I ain't seen a thing.

It's funny how time changes some things, and not others. It had been twenty years since that episode, yet in the courtroom just the other day that boy's baby browns searched my face for forgiveness in much of the same way they had back then. For some time I had been coming to the trial religiously, like most of the other colored folks in Backwaters. It had come to the point where even white employers didn't mind some of their workers taking off to go see some colored boy be brought to justice. They wanted him burned, but they would settle for a lynching. I suppose they wanted to teach the rest of us a lesson, that is of course to keep our "place", and that colored folks couldn't just go around killing folks whenever they so pleased.

The only good that come out of the whole thing, if you could call it that, was that white folks finally stood up and admitted that a colored's life was worth something-- enough that is to carry out a long tedious trial just to avenge their death. Oh no, of course they'd never admit that-that was the purpose of the whole thing. I mean, how would it look for them to be avenging the life of some colored woman, when it was clear that a white woman's life far outweighed that of any colored, male or female? We were living in the South afterall, how could you expect anything less? I suppose they just figured if he could hurt one of his own kind, it was no telling what he would do to one of their kind, so justice must be brought about-- even if it did mean they would have to defend the honor of some colored woman in the process.

I don't truly know why any of the other coloreds came to the trial. I can only

speaking for myself. I came out of fascination. It's odd to say, and I feel guilty about even admitting it and all, but I just had to be there. I wanted to know if he truly did it, and why. It all seemed so unreal, like something come out of the silver screen. It was like we were all on the outside looking in, with a big wide screen separating real from unreal. I lived right next to the boy and his Ma for as long as I can remember. In fact, I helped bring both of them into this world, but that had no bearing on our contact. They both were so distant from everybody in Backwaters-- colored and non-colored, family and non-family, it didn't matter. They lived in their own silent picture show. The trouble came when the boy tried to cross over, and couldn't adapt, and I suppose that's one of the reasons why he supposedly killed that girl the brutal way he did. At the Wake and funeral that poor thing's casket had to be closed. Even Snutty Sanders, the best undertaker this side of living, couldn't do anything for that child's face and various other parts. I say child, but she was a full-grown woman, much younger than myself though. She was a pretty something too-- sugar brown skin, a little mocha mixed with sunshine, big black doe eyes, cute little nose, and full pursed lips- the kind that men go so crazy over that they can hardly stand.

She had a future too. I used to see her all the time doing volunteer work down at the community center, helping the young kids out. She did community theatre too, and could have easily followed in the shadows of Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge. She could've made it too. Girls like that always make it, because they have enough hope to shadow out reality. It's only when the unreal squirms into the picture that leads to their fall. And that's what happened to Sojourner. Acanthus stepped in, and that's when her

dream deferred...

Part I

Chapter 1

Backwaters always seemed to have a shadow hanging over it, a deep gray which found itself in the drinking water and made folks feel like they were choking, a gray that fell like acid rain upon the flesh, penetrating the pores and blackening everything that lied therein. It got so that a heaviness had begun to hang in the air, a thick gray coating the lungs -- heavy, sharp, suffocating. But nothing seemed to stop the people from coming out onto their porches, or huddling in front of paint-peeled storefronts to taste and spit out gossip after the sun went down.

Evening time was a time for talk, a time to ease out of smelly work boots, tighten headrags, and settle into cornshucked-bottomed chairs and the day's sweat so one could lean back and conjure up lies. In Backwaters lies were magic, because they made one forget about the gray that straddled them throughout the day, and kept them twisting and turning way into the deep of night. But there were some folks in Backwaters who couldn't muster the magic of lies, a handful of folks who would rather settle for the gray, and stay shielded behind locked doors and drawn shades. Dahlia Marie Fountainbleu was one such person, a woman who kept herself so tight and closed that even God had to

wonder about what secrets she kept.

It wasn't too often that she found herself at Pap Mirro's Five and Dime- once or twice a month maybe when she was out of the essentials- bread, butter, cotton balls, and olive oil. She'd have that little boy of hers creeping along behind her, holding tightly onto the hem of her dress. He always looked scared, and too pretty to be a boy. In fact, folks hadn't known his gender until it came time for him to be toilet-trained.

She used to comb that child's hair into three pigtails, slicked down with olive oil and fancied up with colorful silk-strewn ribbons. She had on an occasion or two dressed him up in a dress, once for his christening, and another time just because the periwinkle blue, lace-trimmed number in Rosenstein's Department store window was too darling to pass up. Folks got to accepting that he was a she, and nobody thought otherwise until his Ma swallowed her pride.

After months of trying to get the boy to use the outhouse proper-like, instead of doing his business in his underpants, Dahlia called Mrs. Abby Rubins over. Well at the time Mrs. Rubins was keeping watch over her niece from Maryland, Charletta Mae, who had come to spend the summer with her because her folks said the girl was getting too unruly, and needed to be sent down to the country for a while to learn some home training.

Mrs. Rubins thought nothing of it when she invited Charletta over to Dahlia's with her, for the girl had remarked time and time again how much she admired the

Fountainbleus, and their life of secrecy, that and the mere fact that the girl fell in love with their cafe au lait skin and silk-like hair, of which her Auntie chastised her for,

“That ain’t nothing to be loving somebody over.” Mrs. Rubins would say.

“They sure are pretty people, Auntie. Don’t even look real. Look like baby dolls just come out the box. Brand new baby dolls.”

“You hush your mouth gal, and don’t let me hear you talk no more of that foolishness.”

“I’ll do no such thing. God gave me a mouth, and I’ll say what I will.” Then there would be a hush, a swat of a wet dish rag, or a smack across the girl’s face, and she would be laid out on the floor caught up in some crying fit from where her Auntie had put her in her place. The sight of the big burley girl carrying on like a baby would sicken Mrs. Rubins, and she would go off and calm her nerves somewhere, leaving the girl to her sulking. But Charletta would soon get up, wiping away her tears and cursing and swearing. And maybe every now and then lick her tongue in whatever direction she thought her Auntie might be, “Old Bitty”. Then she would find her a little corner of the house to drift off to, making sure however that she situated herself near a window, where she could look out and get a good look at the Fountainbleus’ squat, ill-yellow house, hoping maybe by chance she would see the pretty lady out in the yard, putting clothes on the line or picking figs. Or maybe she would see that darling little girl of hers, running around pretending to soar through the hot air like a sparrow.

Charletta loved the little girl most of all, because she had long pigtailed that hung

almost to her waist, and that were always slicked down so beautifully. Her own hair could not do that. One time she saw Miss Dahlia down at Pap Mirro's, buying cotton balls and olive oil, and got the nerve to ask her what she was buying that for, and Miss Dahlia told her, "Why, for our hair, of course. Olive get all the kinks out." Well, Charletta became so fascinated by how something in such a small bottle could possibly make someone beautiful that she did not think twice when she reached down into her Auntie's purse that evening and drew out a dime. The next morning she snuck off to Pap Mirro's and bought cotton balls and olive oil. When she got back, her Auntie was up, putting on coffee and frying eggs,

"Where you been gal?"

"I got the notion to take me a walk, Auntie." All the while she concealed the paper bag in the back of her underpants. If she walked side-ways or backwards her Auntie would not notice the bulge that hiked her dress up even higher than normal.

"What you walking all funny-like for?" Auntie was getting more suspicious now, "Where you been?"

"Nowhere." Then Charletta sped off to the back room and locked the door behind her. She stood before the dusty maple wood vanity and loosened her plaits one by one, and gently rubbed the olive oil onto her hair with the cotton balls, all gentle-like as she would imagine Miss Dahlia would do. But no magic was happening. She shrugged her shoulders. Maybe it takes some time to start working." So she brushed her hair back into place, and plaited it into four pigtails which hung to her shoulders.

When she got to the breakfast table her Auntie looked at her side-eyed, "What

you been doing in that room all this time?”

“I been tending to my business, what about you?” Charletta shrieked back, expecting a smack across her head or face, but her Auntie was not studying about her this early in the morning, for she knew that the girl would say or do something smart-alecky later on that day and she would put her in her place then, for it wasn’t uncommon for Charletta to get smacked less than four times on any given day.

By mid-day Mrs. Rubins noticed a difference in Charletta’s hair. The plaits seemed to have shrunken in size, and appeared brick-hard, “Child, what have you been doing for your hair to have gone back like that? I just waum combed it yesterday.” She remarked to her as she watched the over-sized girl play with some homemade paper dolls. She and Charletta were sitting out on the front porch, and the sun seemed to beat down on them harder than normal. Charletta burst into tears,

“Ah, Auntie, I was just trying to be beautiful like Miss Dahlia. I’m sorry.” Before she or her Auntie could catch hold of the situation, Charletta found herself smothering her face in the soft worn cotton of her Auntie’s housedress. Somehow the smell of grease and lye, caught up in the thin colored fibers, comforted the girl, and her Auntie could not do anything but melt and hold her. She detected the scent of olive oil rising up from the little girl’s head, and sensed what had happened, “You hush now, gal. You too big for all this crying. Come on. We going to wash all that out your hair, and pass the hot comb through it. That made Charletta so happy that she rushed into the

house and headed straight for the kitchen.

In the evening time, when Charletta sat on the kitchen floor nestled between her Auntie's soft brown thighs and got her hair straightened, her Auntie told her,

“The Lawd, don't like ugly, child. He don't like folks trying to pretend to be something they ain't. Him above made all types of folks. Some He give straight hair, some He give kinky hair, some He give curly hair. It don't matter none to Him. It shouldn't matter none to you neither.”

Charletta sat quiet and contained. She wanted to ask her Auntie right then that if loving one's self was so important, why did some colored folks straighten their hair when God didn't make it that way, but then she decided not to- seeing how Auntie had that hot comb in her hand and was short of temper. Auntie would probably brand her and wouldn't think twice of it. Then Charletta would be walking around with a burn scab on her face for a good three weeks.

The morning Miss Dahlia swallowed her pride and came over to ask Mrs. Rubins to come help her toilet train Acanthus, Charletta was half asleep, but she was alert enough to hear the woman's soft tapping upon the screendoor, “Miss Abby. Miss Abby...” Miss Dahlia kept saying in a whisper-like tone, “Miss Abby...”

Abby was Auntie's first name. Miss Dahlia was a woman, and more than old enough to call Auntie by her first name, but from her short stay down South, Charletta learned it was customary for folks to address older folks by Miss or Mister so-and-so.

But Charletta still thought it was funny to hear grown women and men address other grown folks in that manner. So many times she had to cover her mouth to keep from exploding with laughter.

“Miss Abby, Miss Abby...”

Charletta was wondering what was taking her Auntie so long to answer the door. She got up herself, and went to tend to the matter. She heard her Auntie back in the kitchen singing some Spiritual, while putting on grits. It’s no wonder the old woman didn’t hear Miss Dahlia lightly tapping away on the front screendoor. When Auntie gets caught up in song, she tunes everybody out save God and this angel friend of hers she’s been known to conversate with from time to time.

Charletta looked around for her Uncle Clement, but he was nowhere to be found. Maybe he was outback in the outhouse making water. Sometimes it took him forever to make water. Or maybe those yellow folks from across the creek needed him to go work in their fields today. It was Saturday of course, but sometimes those Creoles needed hands on Saturdays too. She always heard Uncle Clement complain about those yellow niggers in the eveningtime in front of Pap Mirro’s,

“Them is some money hungry bastards,” He would say, “You could have but one good hand and leg, and them SOBs will still work that one hand and leg as if it were two.”

Uncle did not like yellow niggers. He especially did not like Miss Dahlia and her child, who came to live on this side of the tracks. He said they acted “too good” to be around his kind. It probably was a good thing that Uncle was not there that morning

when Miss Dahlia came tapping on their screendoor, Charletta thought. He probably would have run her off or spat on her.

“Miss Abby, Miss Abby...”, Miss Dahlia kept saying real soft-like. Charletta wondered why she just didn’t go around to the back door where Auntie might hear her better, but then she remembered Auntie once telling her something about how Miss Dahlia’s type of people have an aversion to back doors.

“They weren’t raised like regular colored folk,” Auntie said, “You won’t never see none of their kind going to no back door. That’s why if they have to talk to white folk they have them meet them out in the road somewhere, or send a message to them through a colored who ain’t too proud to go ‘round back.”

When Charletta reached the screendoor, Miss Dahlia stopped her tapping, and just stared at the little girl who had just too much sleep in her eyes for her own taste, “Morning Charletta. Is Miss Abby in? I hate to disturb her and all, but I got a real emergency.”

For a moment after that they just stared at one another. Then Charletta remembered that she had just rolled out of bed and her hair was not combed. Feeling ashamed, she shot to the back of the house to where her Auntie was, and told her that she had a visitor. Then she went running into the back room, and started brushing her hair violently. She heard her Auntie go out to the screendoor. She and Miss Dahlia started talking about Acanthus, and how it was urgent for Auntie to come over.

“I can’t take it no more, Miss Abby.” She heard Miss Dahlia say.

“Alright, Doll. I’ll be over soon as I can. Let me go turn down my stove.” Then the screendoor closed, and she could hear Auntie’s slippers slap against the hardwood floor of the parlor and hallway, then against the worn linoleum in the kitchen, “Charletta, you get out here gal.” She yelled to her, “We got to go over to the Fountainbleus.”

“You go on, Auntie. I’ll stay here. My hair ain’t combed.” She yelled back.

“If you don’t get your hobby horse out here right now...You come if I say come!”

Shortly thereafter Charletta appeared in the kitchen doorway, with one plait fully plaited, and another half frazzled.

“You ain’t staying up in this house by yo’self, no. You get into too much mischief.”

“Ah Auntie, please let me comb my hair first, then I’ll come running over soon as I get done.”

Auntie did not feel like fussing this morning. That yellow gal next door had her too worried about that boy of hers, “You hurry it up then.” She snapped back at Charletta. A half smile began to surface on the girl’s face, but she quickly made it disappear before Auntie got the notion to change her mind.

“Thank you, Auntie.” She said too polite and cheery for her own nature, then sped off to the back room to finish her task.

By the time Charletta came outside, Auntie and Miss Dahlia were headed toward the front yard. Charletta heard whimpering from inside the outhouse. She followed the sound. The door was set ajar. It was dark in there, but not too dark where she couldn't make out Miss Dahlia's little girl standing, facing the back wall. The little girl's hands were in front of her dress. When Charletta opened the door a tad bit wider to ask the child what was wrong, Acanthus jumped and quickly turned around, forgetting that his dress was raised, and his hands still rested on his private. Charletta looked down and could not decide whether to faint or scream, so she just ran. She ran to find Auntie, who by then was already nestled into a chair and chatting things over with Miss Dahlia,

"Just let him stand there a while everyday or so till he feel like he wanna make water. He'll learn don't you fret. Some folks just slow about some of these things, but they learn in their own time, yes Lawd."

Charletta burst through the front door of Miss Dahlia's house, and ran towards her Auntie, panting and gasping for air, "Auntie, ah Auntie.she was out there. I mean he...I saw..."

"Gal, have you forgot your home training? You just don't bust in folks' houses. Now you owe Miss Dahlia an apology."

Charletta caught her breath and apologized, but her mind was still intent on telling Auntie about the sight she saw, "Auntie, out there--"

"I ain't hear you speak to Miss Dahlia."

"Morning, Miss Dahlia."

She and Dahlia exchanged glances and a nod. Fear hung in Dahlia's eyes. She,

like the husky black girl standing before her, with the rising and falling chest, found herself struggling to breathe now. She knew by the little girl's expression and wild eyes that she had discovered that Acanthus was not a she. It worried her that someone else besides her and Miss Abby knew Acanthus' gender. Other folks would not understand. Miss Abby understood, or so she thought, but other folks would not. They might shun her, she thought, might even run her out of town for concealing that her child was a boy. She herself didn't really know why it was so important to conceal the boy's gender. It all was unintentional actually. Dahlia loved dolls as a child, and had hoped someday to have a living doll of her own- to brush her hair, clean her up real nice, and dress her up in the fanciest clothes. When she was younger her grandson had given her this beautiful Maman doll, a doll who had the most beautiful café-au-lait face and the dreamiest eyes. It was dressed in a lavish, lace-trimmed, periwinkle calico dress and gave Dahlia a sense of peace and security whenever she so happened to get lost in her existence. When the first fire came to their plantation home however, a fire spurred on by a fierce lightning storm, the house burned to near pieces, along with her precious doll. For a while, her Ma tolerated the child carrying around the burnt doll, but then when she could not take the stench any longer and started getting embarrassed when guests would come over and inquire about the strange attachment little Dahlia had to that "ole thing", she decided to do away with it. And so she did, though very sneakily. She waited until the child fell fast asleep one night, and stole it from her tight grasp, then gave it to one of slaves to finish it off. The next day Dahlia woke up in tears. Her Ma however could not decide on a good lie to explain the doll's disappearance, so she just told the little one that it was one of those mysterious things that happened- that only God and his angels, or even the devil

only knew about. She then took the little girl into town and had her pick out a new doll, but it was not the same, and for some time she sunk into a deep depression- a depression that only time could heal.

When she did become with child, and that child did not come out as a girl as she had hoped, she did the next best thing with her “misfortune”. She pretended her “he” was a “she”, maybe somehow hoping to resurrect or reincarnate that little lost doll of hers. She believed that Miss Abby understood her actions for some odd reason. Afterall, Miss Abby had never had any children of her own, but she seemed to play the role of a mother figure for everyone that came her way. Dahlia figured that her own form of pretending was no more different than Miss Abby’s, therefore the old woman must have understood her reasonings, otherwise she would have been let Dahlia’s little secret be known.

Dahlia had to leave from across the tracks just three years back, because her own mother thought Acanthus would come out too black, but now if she had to pick up and leave off again, where would she go? Leaving Bayou Lafitte and coming over to Backwaters wasn’t so hard of a task, seeing how she knew Miss Abby lived just across the train tracks. She had known Miss Abby all of her life, seeing how the old woman helped bring her into this world. Miss Abby delivered a lot of babies over in Lafitte. Folks in Lafitte knew of her skills. She could out doctor any doctor. Surprisingly it did not matter to them that she was not of their stock, for anyone who could help get their babies safely over to this side of living could not have been too bad of a person.

“Auntie...” Charletta pleaded.

Auntie tapped her on the behind real firm.

“Now get. Get on out of Miss Dahlia’s house.”

Reluctantly Charletta trotted off towards the front door, every now and then looking back.

“Go on.” Auntie ushered on with a wave of her hand, “Go on, child ‘fore you make my blood thin.”

Charletta could not reach that front door fast enough for Dahlia. Her eyes did not leave the girl’s visage for one moment. Charletta herself was afraid to leave, afraid to go back outside and face the fact that she had seen a girl magically transform into a boy with just one blink of the eye. A boy was prettier than her, that hurt most of all. She wanted to keep this a secret, but somehow found herself in the midst of playing house with Ardetha and Louise, and the words spilled out. And from there they spread like wild fire.....

Chapter

2

Auntie was mad, those two stayed locked away for a good three days, and Charletta had taken to eating dust. It seemed like the only thing that soothed Charletta now was the soft grind of clay dirt against the roof of her mouth, and its delicate melting away upon her tongue.

She blamed herself of course. She didn't have to let the words slip out. Now everybody in Backwaters hated her. She figured that folks could not accept the fact that an outsider, a little girl at that, had discovered something they themselves should have known all the long. Her knowing, and them not knowing seemed a much worse offense than her spitting in their faces and calling them stupid. They did not know Dahlia's he was not a she, but Charletta did, and that hurt. So it wasn't any wonder why they gave the little girl and her Auntie side-eyed looks when they saw them in town. Nor was it a surprise that kids had begun to throw bricks, pebbles, and what-nots at Dahlia's house and spit out "go home" slurs to the occupants therein. And it was all her fault, but there was nothing she could do now, but squat in the road and take in as much clay dirt her small mouth would allow.

Auntie was so mad at Charletta that she wouldn't even whip her. Oh she could of

course, but if she did the child might be so badly hurt that she would be lying in a box six-feet under somewheres, and she herself would be thrown in county jail- prison even, or maybe even on the chain gang. So she chose not to whip the little girl, who had just too much sass in her for her liking. But Auntie let her anger be known of course. In the kitchen she would be cooking and all the while she'd open and slam things, kick and curse,

“Smelling they tails. That's all these young gals do now-a-days. So haughty, smelling the piss in other folks' drawers, tending to grown folks business.”

Auntie made Uncle Clement's life miserable.

“Ah Abby, I don't know what you so sore over. That yellow hussy ain't nothin to you'se nohow. She need to carry herself on back to where she come from. Bringin all this confusion this-a-ways.”

Uncle Clement was at the table, sipping straight black coffee, and clad in his dusty overalls, waiting for those Creoles to come pick him up, ‘That gal ain't done no wrong if you'd ask me. Exposed the truff is what she did.”

“Ah you hush, 'cause you just as bad as her. Believe you the one she learning all them bad ways from. Miss Dahlia ain't done none of you'se no wrong. She just a child herself.”

“Child nothin. That be a full grown woman, yeah. She ought to'n go back where she come from. Ain't nobody asked her to come over here.”

“Where would you have her go then?” Auntie spat out while slamming down his breakfast plate, a plate of pone bread and sausage.

“Let her go on back cross that creek. Her and that gir--, boy of her’n. What she still stayin over here for anyways? That boy ain’t come out black like they was expectin.”

“If you was her, would you go back?” She firmly sat the cup of hot maple next to his plate. It took all her nerve not to throw the steamy hot contents into his face or pour them into his lap. Outside she could hear M’sieur Sarpie’s pick-up cross the tracks, and spatter dust everywhere.

Everyone in Backwaters knew the sharp sputtering sound of M’sieur Sarpie’s pick-up. It was more distinct than any rooster’s wake-up call. When folks heard Sarpie coming they knew it was time to leave the comfort of warm beds to head across that creek, and go work in those Creoles’ fields. And if you were not out in front of your house by the time he came by, there wasn’t any way you would be working that day. Sarpie and those other Creoles didn’t take any stuff from the niggers in Backwaters. To some, the Creoles seemed even harder to please than those Cajuns, and they didn’t pay as well either. But the fact of the matter was that they brought work to folks in Backwaters, a town that was so small and unknown that it seemed nestled between nowhere and nowhere.

Regardless of how much folks hated those yellow niggers they had to admit that they were their only link to survival-- the only means by which they could put food on their tables, clothes on their backs, and send their kids to the local schoolhouse. But even more than that the Creoles gave them things to complain about, things that bound them together in the evening time in front of paint peeled storefronts or on sagging porches. The Creoles gave them appetites for lies, tall tales, gossip, magic-- whatever you had a

mind to call it. Though they may have hated them, they knew those yellow niggers kept them breathing, wishing, wanting, and surviving. It was all in God's plans. But Uncle Clement wasn't hearing any of that garbage. He proclaimed himself a self-made man.

"Ah Lawd, there Sarpie come. The sun ain't even woke yet and he high tailing it over here like he gotta beat the second coming." She laid a hand to Clement's plate.

"Un-uhnn.." He lightly tapped away at her hand.

"Don't you 'un-uhnn' me. Sarpie'll be down here shortly. You best get out front and wait like the others. I'll wrap this up in a dish cloth for you. You can eat it along the way."

"Un-uhnn. Now he done et his breakfast at his table, and I'm gone sit and eat mine. I ain't studyin bout Sarpie. He know I don't play."

"We can't afford for you to miss another day, no. You know how he is. You either be on the truck when he say be on it or don't work at all."

"Well, he gone wait on my black ass this mawnin. I ain't movin till I eat my food. He ain't workin me like no plantation nigger. Hell no, un-uhnn. Now go on woman. Go tend to yo business."

Auntie gave him the evil eye, then she went on over to the sink to wash dishes. Between him and that Charletta, they were about to tear her nerves to pieces. She began singing to God, or to whomever was up there who had a mind to listen. Meanwhile Clement had begun to pour the maple onto his pone bread, he carefully cut the bread with his knife and fork, and ate deliberately slow. He would show that yellow bastard who was the real boss. He would eat his breakfast and make him wait on him.

"He down by Levee's place now. You best be hurryin. He ain't comin back cross

them tracks Clement.”

“Leave me be woman, and let me eat my breakfast in peace.”

“The devil is busy this mawnin, yes Lawd. I tell you.”

She continued with her washing and singing. Shortly thereafter, Sarpie was out in front of their house tooting his horn. The horn tooted once, then the truck sped off.

Clement continued eating. His wife just looked back at him expressionless. He finished his meal, sipped some more coffee, wiped his mouth with the dish rag, and got up and headed out the back door. Abby went to the door to look after him. She saw him situate his worn hat on his head, rustle in his pockets a bit, then stroll off towards the tracks whistling. She shook her head, ”Do help us Jesus-- that man, that man.”

The house on 1011 Sycamore lay still and quiet for all of three days, save for the frequent early morning and late afternoon jeers of neighborhood children trying to rouse the dead within, with chants of ushering the outcasts back across that creek.

Inside the woman Dahlia sat rocking in a quiet little corner of the house, eyes transfixed to nothing in particular. The boy stood looking out of the front room window—watching, waiting, and expecting for when the crowd of children would return.

He would look out at them through the dusty panes, unafraid of their words, rocks, and various other objects they had a mind to throw at him, for somehow a little voice in his mind told him that he was invincible.

It got so that he looked forward to seeing the raggedy mouthed children with the unkept heads of hair and dust smothered clothes, because before then nobody hardly ever

paid him any mind, so that he became to feel as though he was drifting through their consciences as thin as any ghost.

He became fascinated with them—how they seemed to have uncontrollable fires brewing within, how he had been at the heart of those flames, how his own Ma seemed so disinterested by them that she gathered enough strength to drown out their noise, and yes, even him.....

The old folks used to say that a woman squatting down in the road eating dust had nothing but man troubles on her mind, but the townspeople did not know what to make of the young girl Charletta, who had taken a fancy to scooping up the red sunburnt clay dirt and devouring it as though it were her last and only meal. Afterall, what man could a young girl like she have to worry about? What or who could be eating up her heart so? She hadn't even started her woman's business yet, and even still was too tender to be having wet dreams. Oh, they didn't know what to make of it, and didn't feel like straining their brains to figure it out. So out of convenience, they simply labeled her as crazy -- traumatized, of course, by discovering that Dahlia's she was actually a he. They couldn't blame the girl much either, for that revelation alone was potent enough to even make grown folk take leave of their senses.

But pitied her, though they may, that pity was not enough to shadow out the bitterness they developed towards her for discovering something too intimate for an outsider to know. That sort of thing was supposed to be kept hidden. You couldn't just let any folk see or know about your dirty laundry, for in Backwaters secrets were kept

like relished heirlooms, hidden in the attics of folks' minds, and only brought out, not in the form of gossip mind you, but in the form of Signifying. Signifying protected the secret, those whom gave birth to the secret, and those select few who held the secret. It protected you from being accused of out-and-out malicious gossip, a means of talking about a subject by talking around a subject—a genteel way of shunning folks and their actions without actually ever having done so. In this way, nobody's name got disgraced, that is at least not directly. This was how it went in Backwaters for as long as anybody could remember. And for the past three days folks did up some Signifying on Charletta Mae, her Auntie, and those two locked up in that house on 1011 Sycamore.

.... You can be ridin on the coat tails of that Miss Sass yeah, but I'll have you so far knocked into that ground you'll be eatin dust till the Second Coming....

Say man, anybody seen that nigga Ray Earl. Man owe me a dolla and fifteen cents, believe he trying to pull a 1011 on me.....

.....Sat'day gone, I met me what look like a good looking gal at the Cake Walk. We got to dancing and jiggling against one another. Shoot man I felt that wood up under her dress and hauled tail outta there quicker than The devil could spit fire. You won't find me messing wit no 1011s, I need The genuine stuff.....

Y'all know they done took Bess Parker down to Sweet Valley of the Rock.

For true?

Yeah Chile, them folkses say her mind pulled a 1011....

Now y'all know Judas done come back yeah. Done came back with thin blood, rheumatism, and a silent tongue. Never thought he'd take a liking to Backwaters though, stuck up in some ole woman's body, but I suppose anything's possible.

That ain't nothin but a word, I hear.....

And so it went- this talking, this signifying. And it drove poor Charletta just about clean over the border,

“Auntie, make'em stop. Make'em stop staring at me, and whispering...Auntie, Auntie..”

But Auntie was too mad at Charletta to pay her any mind. So the girl was left to endure the snares and cold glances alone, her only solace being to sneak off to Winbush Hills to sit and let the soft clay dirt work its magic.

Oftentimes before leaving her Auntie's yard she would look back at the sad looking house numbered 1011, expecting it to somehow crumble or turn into a pillar of salt, for she had not seen the boy or his Ma for what seemed a lifetime. She of course suspected that she caused their deaths. But on the fourth morning of silence she made the mistake of tripping over her Uncle Clement's spittoon sitting on the top step. The

falling tin made a clatter loud enough to wake the dead, and when Charletta quickly looked around to see if anybody had seen her fall, she noticed a stir in the front room window of 1011. Someone pushed the shade back, someone small. Charletta could only stare, and the face stared back at her as if disappointed somehow to only see her there, crouched over on all fours. The shade quickly slung back into place. Charletta rose, not even bothering to brush the dirt off of her new gingerbread colored gingham dress her Ma shipped her just the week before.

She found herself somehow desperately limping towards the sad yellow house, past the weak picket fence, up the wobbly steps, and onto the creaking, gray-planked porch. She softly knocked on the window, and a small face appeared – a pretty little face with chestnut colored eyes, a face that registered as familiar even though it was no longer framed by two long pigtails, which would have hung to the child’s waist had they still been there. The tiny head now bore soft loose curls, which seemed to delicately wrestle against one another atop his head. Charletta gently placed her palm against the window, her eyes somehow pleaded for forgiveness. Slowly, very slowly the child placed his palm likewise on the dust pane. Charletta released a smile, and Acanthus smiled back. Charletta pointed in the direction of the door. The child looked with a tad bit of apprehension. The shade slung back into place, little padded feet moved across wood. The doorknob struggled. There was a click, a gentle opening, and Acanthus appeared before the big oak-brown girl, clad in his crimson red silk pajamas.

“You want to come with me?”

Acanthus gave no response, his three-year old mind could not register the words. He didn’t even know how to talk yet, much less understand what the charming brown girl

with the caring eyes was trying to say. She held her hand out. He gave her his. She closed the door to 1011 softly, and they ran past the gray, planked porch, down the wobbly steps, and flew through the entrance of the leaning white picket fence.

Chapter

3

Dahlia- who could forget that pretty lemon-colored face? A face that seemed like it had been folded and smoothed over and over again like homemade yellow cake batter. You would look into that face and see those eyes. They could have reminded you of silver dollars if you weren't careful, or if you had just a tad bit too much liquor in your system to inform you otherwise. Her eyes were just that shiny, just that hopeful. They were the color of a patch of azure sky, tinged with just a tad bit of midnight, and could make you easily forget about a sunrise or sunset and settle for a mere rainbow of blue. Folks in Backwaters never knew her, only knew of her. She kept to herself most of the time, for fear her visage might awaken some nightmare of the past that slave days had given birth to. She got to figuring that folks would get to looking into her face and remember. Afterall, 1918 wasn't too far off from 1863. Some folks still had cat'o'nine tail wounds they were nursing after, callused feet they were hobbling around on, missing hands, fingers, eyes, and whatever else—not to mention hundreds upon hundreds of ghosts haunting them all in their consciences. Seeing that gal's face was like stirring up dead leaves, or seeing a bad picture show over and over again. Her only saving grace were her eyes, for they reminded folks of water blue, and sky blue – blues that led them to much wanted freedom.

But even still she kept to herself, and they did not complain. It wouldn't bother them none much either if it so happened that one day she and that boy of hers magically disappeared to back across that creek. It would make their lives much easier, no doubt, not to have a constant reminder of those overbearing Creoles in their midst. It was bad enough that Sarpy came every morning to awaken them from their silver dollar dreams, only to come and carry them off to work in their fields as if they were common slaves. Those Creoles had a superiority complex—had the sad notion of making themselves and other folks believe that they were more “human” than Backwaters coloreds. And it was assumed that Dahlia could not be any different, for she was one of them—a Creole, an outsider. Backwaters folks had no room, nor tolerance for outsiders— they barely had enough patience to muster their own kind.

The only friend Dahlia had in Backwaters was Miss Abby Rubins, and even that friendship seemed to be one contrived out of obligation rather than love, seeing how the old woman helped bring her into this world.

Dahlia's people were Fountainbleus, fourth generation Creoles who could trace their roots all the way back to the countrysides of France, and the grass roots of Africa. But they of course showed a preference for the former, simply because they were raised to believe that it was a more distinguished and cultured blood. Dahlia's folks upheld this view so much so that they forbade her and all of her siblings to have marital relations with the likes of common coloreds, such as those in Backwaters. Even those coloreds up in Mound Promised, who owned more land than they, and had their very own colored

mayor did not register as “good” enough to mingle with “their kind”. Lafitte Creoles had to keep their bloodlines pure, afterall, even if this meant cousin marrying cousin, niece marrying uncle, and yes even sister marrying half-brother. And it was this last predicament that Dahlia fell into. It so happened that one day she overheard her Maman and Tante Marie talking the matter over,

“It seem like this be the only way, chere. She won’t look at none of them boys visiting up here, no.....I tell her this one be good for her. He got the money, yeah—the blood, yeah. But she just look at me like I done plumb lost my mind. I just be looking out for her.”

“ ‘Sieur Pete Robecheaux would make her a right match. His people come from that Isle Breville place just Nord of here. Them be some good folk, yeah. You marry one of them, you be married for life.’ Tante Marie was busy working her mouth along with her crochet needles.

“She don’t wanna hear none of that, no. I don’t know what ails her. She act like she wanna be alone.”

“Never heard of such, never in all my days. Ladyfolk need a man. Him above made it so. ‘Sides, who she gonna pass her bloodlines to? Folks need bloodlines, else their family dies.’”

“She don’t understand that, no, and I’m sick of it all. I done got Beatrice married off, Sophie, Jacqueline--- she the only one putting up a fuss. I just soon as have her and Ambrose married off together. That way I kill two birds with one stone.”

“You do what you have to do, chere. Nobody gonna cast no stones.”

Dahlia heard these words and took off to the woods to sit, think, and mourn. She could not believe that her Maman and Tante Marie would truly make her marry her own dear Ambrose, for she herself had helped rear the boy-- changed his undergarments, made sure he was properly fed, disciplined, and given the proper daily dosage of hugs and kisses. She looked forward to the day when she would see him married off to some fine gentlewoman, who could appreciate his tender heart. But she never, in all her days, imagined that she would be that gentlewoman. To her it all seemed sacrilegious, and she would not follow through with it regardless of what amount of force her Maman and Tante Marie entailed to use. She made it up in her mind too that she would not marry any of those blue-veined suitors her Ma had sent up to the house to woo her with their riches and good graces either, for she figured that she could survive even better in this world as a self-made woman. She had known of women before who survived being husbandless, and she would be no different, perhaps even stronger.

But what would she do about her Maman and Tante Marie? How could she get out of marrying precious Ambrose? Oh, she didn't know what to do, so she decided to talk matters over with Miss Abby, who just lived a piece off, across the creek and over the railroad tracks.

When she finally reached across the tracks, those Backwaters folks did up some staring. So much so that it made poor Dahlia feel as though she had walked into town all exposed. She had to look down at her skirts more than once to make sure that nothing underneath was peeking out unawares.

The womenfolk stared at her as if to question, "What you doin on this side?", but the menfolk stared out of wanting, for it wasn't too often that they caught sight of a pretty dolled up, yellow apparition. That gal's sorrow-stricken blue eyes put them all under a trance, even the children playing in the road had to stop their horseplay, and stare as the yellow woman with the blue eyes drifting past. Folks were so dumbstruck that when she approached any one of them, she had to repeat herself more than twice,

"I said I'm looking for a Miss Abby. She's a cullud woman about yea high." She held her right hand out so that it rose just above five feet from the ground, "She's a midwife, Sir."

Pap Mirro twisted his face so that it resembled a ruggedly twisted oak.

"She birth babies, Sir."

"Oh, oh,...you talkin bout Mama Mae- Abby Mae Rubins. We calls her Mama Mae....Yeah, she live ovah that-a-way, three houses down from the tracks."

Dahlia turned in the direction the man was pointing, "On the right or left?"

"Well, if you comin from this direction, she gone be on your right. Now if you comin from the tracks, she gone be on your left."

"I thank you, Sir."

"No problem. What you lookin for Mama Mae for?—That is if you don't mind me askin."

"I can't quite say, Sir. It's of a personal nature."

"Woman's business, I suppose. I understand, I got two girls of my own, and a wife at that, but I wouldn't quite call her no girl. No, them days been gone for her...."

“Well, I do appreciate your kindness, but I must be on my way.”

“Umm-human.”

By the time she reached Miss Abby’s place, the bottoms of her skirts collected enough dust to bury a small child.

“Good Lawd, Chile, what you doing over on this side? And look at your skirts too. Your Ma gonna have a ‘tack sure nuff. Not to mention Miss Maimie who got to clean up them things.”

“Forgive me for disturbing you, Miss Abby. But I got some troubles on my mind, and I didn’t have nobody else to go to.”

“Come on in, come on in.” Miss Abby held the screendoor open for the slight girl. Dahlia gathered her skirts into one hand, and walked onto the intimate porch. She looked past the opened doorway apprehensively. She had never been in a common colored’s house before. She did not know what to expect. Her folks always made it seem as though common coloreds lived like animals.

“Come on, chile, fore you let all them squittas in here. I ain’t gointa bite ya.” Dahlia released a stiff smile, then proceeded through the doorway. The house was small and tight, barely bigger than her own bedroom chambers at home. She noted that it was a meager establishment, but immaculately kept.

“Grab you a seat ovah there. You’ll have to excuse the place. Had I known you were comin...”

“No, no, Miss Abby, everything’s fine. No, really, I’m the one’s that’s imposing.”

“You want some’in to eat? I can waum up some left–over pone bread, some corn coffee.”

“No, really, I’m fine.”

“Must not be too fine. Some’in got you travelin so far a ways from home, and all by your lonesome too.”

“It’s Maman,” Dahlia paused, unsure of just how to put what she wanted to say, “.....she wants me to marry Ambrose. But I can’t, Miss Abby. I just can’t...” The tears broke way, and before she knew it, she found herself wrapped in the old woman’s arms, holding on to her as if she were her last and only prayer.

Miss Abby was not surprised at all by the news. Those folks across that creek were known for doing such type of things with their own kin, for as long as she could remember, “You pull yourself together, Chile. There ain’t nothing I can do about it. That’s your people. What make you think they gonna listen to me, I ain’t nothing but the help.”

“What to do, Miss Abby? What to do? I can’t have no relations with Ambrose. That’s my brother, that’s my brother.”

“You don’t have no other place you can go off to?”

“No, Ma’am”

“I don’t know then, chile. I don’t know....Maybe if you marry one of them boys your Ma been sendin up to the house. Look like that might be your only hope.”

“But Miss Abby, I don’t want no one.”

“You want to be all by your lonesome? A woman of your kind can’t make it all by her lonesome.”

“Who says?” Dahlia’s voice and head shot up defensively.

“That’s just the way it be.”

“I can make it just as good as anyone.”

“Maybe so, chile—maybe so.”

Dahlia left Miss Abby’s house that evening dissatisfied, but grateful that the old woman opened her arms and ears to her. She knew what she would do, what she had to do. She would get herself with child, a common colored’s child, a berry-black child, who’s Pa she’d say ran off without a trace. That way she wouldn’t have to marry Ambrose, nor anyone else. It was a foolish notion, true, but there wasn’t anything else her seventeen year old mind could come up with.

It was by word of mouth that she heard of the Saturday Night goings on over in Backwaters—the Cake Walks at Benny’s Juke Joint, the Suppas at Alice Mae’s and Miss Judy’s, the crap games at Ray Earl’s that nobody was supposed to know about, the liquor drinking, card shuffling, cigarette smoking, lovemaking, backbiting, low down Sat’d day Night Backwaters blues. Dahlia heard this in bits and pieces from the hired help, conversations of which she eavesdropped on, or walked up on by “mistake”. Most often she would hear such talk from Precious Dolby and Leontine Parker, two of the younger

help, when they'd be out in the kitchen, a good piece from the main house.

"Oooh chile, Nadine say there gonna be some turning out at Benny's this Sat'day." She was shelling peas, swirling thoughts, and talking all at once.

"Don't I know it. Them Backstreet Boys gonna be playin too. Honey, you know I gots to get me something bright'n'tight sewed up." Leontine rose and gave three or four soft swivels to her generous yam-colored hips, and let loose of a gapped toothed smile that made her lips put a rose petal to shame.

"I already gots what I'm gointa wear."

"Do tell, do tell." Leontine resumed washing dishes, her mind dancing with all sorts of magical thoughts. Saturday nights had a way of doing that to you, especially if the week had whipped you some kind of merciful with work, and made you so you couldn't long for anything else but the pleasure of a Saturday Night.

"My sister Clementine throwed me together this little red number that's gointa put that apple that tempted Eve to shame. I just hope that Elias Green gonna be there to see me wear that dress out." With that, Precious sashayed across the shiny linoleum, her pencil-thin legs looking as though they would give way at any moment.

"You always was sweet on ole Elias."

"Shoot can you blame me? All of Backwaters wanta piece of him, including some fellas."

"You ain't never lying, Precious. I had a sweet tooth for him myself, some time ago. God broke the mold and burned it when he made him."

"Yes Lawd, don't I know it. The man is built like a fine oak." Precious went

over to the stove to light a cigarette.

“And got a face that could out charm any angel’s.”

“Yes indeed. And he makes that money now—leases himself out ‘tween those Creoles and Cajuns, buildin they dream houses. I hear there’s talk of him buildin his own place right on the outskirts soon enough. I know it’s gointa be a fine place.”

“Fine place for a fine man. It’s a wonder no woman has snatched him up yet.” Precious let out a thin array of smoke, and watched it slowly become one with the surrounding air, “He’s got his picks and chooses. A real particular fellow. But anybody’s got to be that way. Don’t nobody wanta marry no trash.”

“Amen, but I ain’t gonna lie. They got some folk what don’t care.”

“Yeah, don’t I know it...That Sweeney girl, what’s her name?”

Leontine didn’t even bother looking up from her now half full barrel of dishes, ” Believe her name’s Dorthea. Yeah, Dorthea Sweeney.”

“Yeah, that’s her. She got her some trash now....”

Dahlia thought it best to clear her throat and let her presence be known before the women got too far off the subject, which caused her to eavesdrop on them in the first place.

Precious panicked and didn’t know what to do with her cigarette, which was only now starting to get good, so she simply held it behind her back and fought a cough, ‘Miss Dahlia, you sneak up on a person like a ghost, yeah.”

Leontine only briefly looked up from her washing.

“I’m sorry to startle you. I was just passing through is all. My Maman sent me

out here to get her evening tea.”

“Look over yonder.” Leontine juttred her head in the direction of the island in the center of the room, where an intricately patterned porcelain teapot sat, puffing out faint wisps of steam.

Dahlia went over to the teapot, all the while contemplating about how she would re-introduce the subject of Saturday Night, ‘Forgive me, but I overheard you all talking about Saturday Night.’

“Oh, don’t you never mind us, Miss Lady. We was just shootin the breeze. Hope we didn’t offend you none.” Leontine continued her washing.

Precious got scared, ”Oh, Miss Dahlia, please don’t tell your Ma. I needs this job like a sinner need salvation.” Her arms were still behind her back. Her arms were getting tired. She decided to put the cigarette out by smashing it against the wall, then secretly slipped it into her apron pocket. She then resumed her task of taking peas out of pods, for the Fountainbleu’s evening supper.

“Oh, don’t you worry none, Precious, I wouldn’t rat on you...I would like to know more about that Cake Walk business though.”

Leontine and Precious kept quiet.

“What’s the matter?” Dahlia looked from one to the other, then back again.

“Well, uh, Miss Dahlia, with all due respect, you shouldn’t be worryin your mind with stuff like that. You being an upstandin lady and all.”

Precious decided to cut her way back into the conversation, “A Cake Walk ain’t nothin but some get-together us common folk have, Miss Dahlia. You wouldn’t be interested none in that sorta thing. Don’t nothin go on there but dancin and jukin, eatin

and conversatin—stuff like that.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Not your kinda fun. You’re more, what’s the word?”

“Re- fined.’ Precious volunteered.

“Yeah more refined.”

“That don’t mean I can’t get down too, if you’d pardon my expression.”

Leontine and Precious could only laugh.

“I wanna come.”

Leontine and Precious laughed harder.

“You’d be like a fish outta water.” Leontine burst out in between laughs.

Dahlia took the teapot and tray, and left them to their laughter. And that Saturday Night she found herself climbing out of her window, and dashing into the night, in search of her baby’s Daddy.

It didn’t take much of a struggle to find out where Benny’s Juke Joint was. All she had to do was follow the light, laughter, and stench of liquor. It was funny too how Leontine and Precious weren’t too far off the mark with their description of Saturday Nights in Backwaters. Those folks sure did know how to string up a good time on two cents and a prayer. She herself had almost got high from the laughter.

Against the wall to her left was a table filled with cakes and other goodies. The

center floor was cleared of all tables, and was instead packed with ample-backed women, who wore their clothes like second skins, and men grinding and grabbing at them everywhere the women allowed. A band in the front of the room was singing and playing something fast and swinging that intoxicated the ears of everyone who gave way to its conjuring rhythms.

Everyone seemed so caught up in the drunkenness of the moment, that they hardly even noticed Dahlia, who looked too prim and proper to be caught alive in such an establishment. Even the red lipstick she smeared across her dime-sized, pursed lips carried an air of innocence. And the ginger brown curls which dangled from her head and framed her smooth, rice-powdered, heart-shaped face conjured up images of chaste school girls, even though they had been put there just hours ago as markers of her growing defiance.

“Care to cut a rug, Sweet Stuff.”

The voice came from behind her. It registered to her as thick and sweet as the sugar clumped up at the bottom of a glass of sweetwater before its stirring. The voice was potent enough to make her knees knock, and she felt blest at the time to have her long skirts on.

“You uh not from around these parts, are you?”

He came around to face her with a face so painstakingly beautiful that she felt ashamed that she hadn’t time enough to kneel down and worship it. Two dimples nestled his cheeks, and a straight line of pearl-white teeth fiddled with her heart.

“Sweetness? You there?” He waved a hand in front of her face. She finally

came to.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Forgive me. This place just has so much excitement going on, I just got plumb ahead of myself.” All the while she was talking she was trying to place the exact color of his skin—Maple brown? Burnt Sienna? Mocha mixed with sunshine? Oh hell, she didn’t know, and didn’t even care. All she knew was that this man stirred something within her she didn’t know she had. He made her feel so drunk she felt like dancing. But of course she didn’t, seeing how she felt as though her moves would do an injustice to the music. But she did smile. God how she did smile. She made him feel so at ease that he took her off to a little nook in the room, to whisper all sorts of sweet nothings into her ears. And it was only then, in that moment that the womenfolk started to take notice of the prim yellow creature, who looked so out of place. How could she even have the nerve to cross that creek, only to come woo and steal the heart of the finest man this side of living- their Elias Green?

“So that’s why she wanted to know!” Precious Dolby spat out, eyebrows drawn in, arms folded, a small hip jutting out, and one foot purposely tapping out of tune with the music, “Why, I oughta go ovah there and...”

“Do nothing.” Leontine advised, “Think girl. You got to works for them folks. You gotta live past Sat’day Night. You got six other days what come before this’n.” Precious hated to agree, but Leontine was right. Getting into some cat fight wasn’t going to solve anything, it especially wouldn’t win the heart of Elias Green, for Elias had a weakness for gentlewomen. And this, Precious would tame herself into being, even if it did take swallowing a little pride and struggle.

Leontine was right. She couldn't do anything about that Miss Priss, who was trying to steal her Elias away, but God she could dance. She could swing those little hips of hers, and shake that round ample bottom loose and tempting enough to give Elias a wet dream or two. And yes, pretty soon he'd wake up and realize, even long for a skinny-legged girl, who could work magic with her hobbyhorse better than any Voodoo Queen in New Orleans could work conjure.

Chapter

4

He got hooked on her. It wasn't intentional. Her eyes had a way of trapping him, of making him feel like he could walk across water or tear into a sky some kind of merciful. No woman had ever made him feel that way before, and certainly none had ever asked to bear his child. Sure, he had loads of women falling at his feet, but bearing children for him probably never crossed their minds. They were too distracted by his warm visage to even think of such. Besides, a baby would only get in the way. A baby meant getting fat and miserable, and being fat and miserable around a man like Elias meant spending lonely nights snuggled up to things that used to be, a hollering child, and wondering where your Elias has gone after hours. No thank you, the women must have tossed and tumbled over and over in their minds and hearts. A man like Elias needed a woman that wasn't bound in any way, save by his loving gaze. But this Dahlia woman, she paid such thoughts never no mind, and he began to love her for it- so much so that he himself, though not completely, began to entertain the thought of becoming the host, who would free her from her trials.

They would always meet somewhere private- in a clearing somewhere, or over at his Uncle Jud Tabineaux's place, just back of the way, a place far enough from the heart of Lafitte to enable them to escape the stares and turned up noses that they may have otherwise encountered.

In these private places they would talk and talk, mainly about Dahlia's plan to conceive. He still was not entirely sold on the idea of knocking her up and leaving off as if nothing ever happened, as if no connections had ever taken place.

"How you figure on all this working out?"

"Just have to believe in it enough,, Elias. That's my only hope."

"Can't you just run off somewheres?"

"I don't got nobody outside of Lafitte."

"What make you think they gonna put up with you being with child, Baby Doll, and no man ? And what if that baby don't come out looking like your people, what then? Don't you think you gonna have to run then?"

There would always be a pause at this point in the conversation, a swishing around of thoughts, "Well, what if I do want a berry black child? Ain't no sin in that.....And I can run if I had to." A wild desperation hung in her eyes. Elias just shook his head, and at the same time tried to shake her blue eyes and all of their blue ghosts from his thoughts, but he couldn't. They made him bend so, made him so weak that not even a whisper up to heaven could shake their spell loose.

He would gather her into his arms in these moments where she seemed so desperate. Her words conveyed the anger of a full grown woman, but her eyes pleaded so helplessly as a child much confused about which way to turn in the heart of a fire.

In his arms he would hold her, and she would allow him, though reluctantly at first, but then his lips would brush against her arms, and he'd sing to her about railroads, wayward men, women left behind, liquor, laughter, and something that hinted at love. She would melt then, allowing him to sway her to the rhythms of his voice that rang like a steady clanging church bell against her tears and heavy thoughts. Something about his voice reminded her of the silent talks she carried on with God, soft comforting talks that lulled her away into deep sleeps.

It wasn't long before Dahlia was with child, for many a sunset had fallen upon them rustling around in the canestalks, or in a field somewhere amidst a rainbow of wildflowers—sometimes even in Jud Tabineaux's bed, a place so sacred that not even he had slept there since his second wife died of Yellow Fever.

Sometimes Dahlia would come home with a thistle or two in her hair, or bearing the scent of milkweed. Her eyes would be lost somewhere her Maman could not affix any particular place to. And the questions would start rolling like thunder.

“Where you been, chere? Your Papa and Tante Marie been tearing this place up looking for you, yeah”

“Nowhere but checking in on the hands.”

“Funny, your Papa done searched them fields from here to kingdom come. He say he ain’t nar bout see you, no.”

Dahlia’s face flushed with a red of shame, her thoughts swirled, trying at best to gather pieces of a lie, “Oh Maman, you know Papa’s eyes ain’t as keen as they used to be. I can remember a time when he could spot a needle in a haystack. Now he can barely see two feet in front of him.” Dahlia’s hands gripped tighter to her hat in hand. The straw nearly cracked beneath the pressure.

Her Maman was turning Dahlia’s words over and over in her mind, as if filtering them somehow. She didn’t feel convinced that her husband would not be able to spot Dahlia’s lemon-yellow face amidst the sea of berry black and oak brown faces of the field hands. Something was not right here. But she nodded her head all the same, “Sho nuff you right about that, chere. Wit age sight and hearing are the first to go. I reckon he mighta missed seeing you.”

“If you will excuse me, Maman, I best get washed up for evening suppa.”

Dahlia retreated into the house, leaving her Maman out on the gallery to sit, think, and wonder. The old woman sensed that the girl was different somehow. An air surrounded her now that she had never caught a whiff of before. Dahlia’s eyes and heart were hiding something, and she would do everything within and outside of her nature to find out what that something was.

She needed someone to be her eyes and ears, and it just so happened that she knew exactly who would be best to fill her shoes. Precious Dolby had proved her worth as a precise and diligent know-it-all, someone who couldn't draw a breath or bat an eye without jutting her nose into other folk's business. Dahlia's Maman had walked in on her many chit-chats out in the kitchen, had caught her many a time peeping into this and that person's window, and fumbling through mailboxes that weren't any of her concern.

Precious Dolby could tell you who was messing around with who, who was having female troubles, how often so-and-so flipped their mattress, washed themselves, and yes even how many times so-and-so made visits to the outhouse. Yes, Precious made an art out of nosiness, and she felt blessed with the privilege of being God's second set of eyes. Being this as it may, it was no wonder as to why Dahlia's Maman called her up to the main house to discuss a certain matter. Of course Precious was scared at first, uncertain of why Madame Fountainbleu would possibly be calling her up to her chambers, other than to announce to her that she no longer needed her domestic services.

"Yes, Ma'am. Tilly say you called for me."

Madame Fountainbleu was sitting next to her bedroom window, lost in thought and heat. She did not even bother to turn and acknowledge the jittery-voiced woman's presence, "Yes, I have matters to discuss with you."

Words came stumbling out of Precious' mouth quicker than she could catch hold of them, "If this is about them extry biscuits I took the other night, well I—I apologize, Ma'am. Y'all had eaten to y'all fill, and...and the biscuits was just sittin there goin to

waste and all...I figured it be best for somebody to eat'em, rather than to let them spoil ,or have them flies pickin and playin 'round wit'em....I don't believe in wastin food.

My Ma raised me good."

"That's fine and all, but I ain't called you up here for that, no." The old woman's eyes were still cast beyond the glass panes. The heavy air in the room pressed down on her so hard that she was sparse for words, "Come open this window here."

Precious nervously went over to the window, words once again found themselves spilling out of her mouth, she opened the window with a slight struggle, "Well, if this is about my leaving early last Monday..Well that just uh couldn't be helped. I uh.."

"Hush gal. You talk too much, yeah. Give yourself some breathing space."

Precious stepped back from the now opened window. She quickly sealed her lips, turning them inward in a desperate effort to keep them from opening, as they often had a mind to do, even when she didn't want them to.

"Now, you know my youngest daughter?"

"Yes, Ma'am, Miss Dahlia."

"Umm-humm....Well I'm worried about her. She goes off hours at a time and don't nobody know where she be hauling off to and why. Child moves like a ghost sometimes."

"Yes'm."

"I want you to look after her for a while." The old woman finally turned her attention away from the window, and now looked in the direction of Precious, whose lips were now clamped tight. Her face radiated some sour something the old woman could not quite put a finger on.

“You there, gal?”

“Yes’m....Now let me get this straight. You want me to look after her- play detective?”

“See where she’s going, and what she’s doing, and get back to me. Leave no stone unturned.”

“Yes’m.”

“But don’t let her know you snooping around on her.”

“Yes’m.”

“You may go now.”

With that Precious scurried out of the old woman’s chambers and closed the door behind her. She felt relieved that she was not going to be let go, and happy that the old woman entrusted her with such a mission, for every since that Saturday night just two months back, when seeing Elias snuggled up to Dahlia in some quiet corner, Precious developed a strong distrust of and distaste for the soft-spoken yellow hussy—so much so that now if she couldn’t find anything to tattle on her about, she would invent something.

She stuck to her closer than any shadow, eyeing her every blink, taking a mental note of what she ate, how she ate, when she did her toiletries, took a nap, a walk, a sit out on the gallery, but mostly she watched how her eyes drifted off. One minute she would be mending a hem of a dress, fumbling through letters, staring hard at birds, and at how lazily the sun fell behind the distant gathering of oaks and cedars, and then she would get this lost look in her eyes, as if watching, waiting, and expecting something to happen. This something seemed to put a glow on Dahlia's face, made it animated, yet still distant all the same. Precious had seen that glow on a woman's face several times over, and usually it signaled the advent of love, or the falling together of death—a glow of innocence. It was a glow that Precious envied, seeing it pressed there on Dahlia's face, and knowing that Elias Green may have been the one to ignite its first spark.

Dahlia must have sensed her second shadow somehow, for she had stopped her mid-day visitations with Elias, and now waited until the deep of night surfaced before she would steal off to her love. The sole gathering place for these midnight rendezvous was none other than Jud Tabineaux's cabin. Jud would leave the two lovers to themselves, and settle somewhere underneath an oak, with a bootleg bottle of liquor nestled in his hand, and memories of his dear Easter haunting him all in his conscience.

Inside, Dahlia and Elias would be tangled up in one another. It seemed that in those moments they could not get close enough.

"I believe somebody's been spying on me." She told him one night as she pressed her ear against his chest, to better hear the soft lump-lump noises his heart made.

“Who you suppose it is?”

“Don’t know. Maman been looking side-eyed at me lately. I suppose she’s got somebody looking after me.”

“Then maybe it ain’t safe for us to be together now.”

He was looking over at the moon, getting lost.

“Well, if she’s got one of the hands to look after me, then we don’t have no problems, seeing how Sarpy take them back across the creek ‘round nine or ten o’clock.”

It bothered him when she got to talking like that, her saying “hands” and “them” as if there was a definite line drawn between the two groups of Coloreds- as if the line was something thick and permanent, which forbade those on either side to cross over. If this was true, where did this leave he and Dahlia?

He kept these thoughts to himself, even though they had awaken him many a night, leaving him breathless and wanting for something that not even Jesus could quench.

Her people would never accept him. He was certain of that. He was not of their “kind”. To them he was just a common colored, this despite the fact that he owned his own lumber yard, could out calculate any school-learnt mathematician, quote both the Old and New Testaments from first word to last, contemplate the philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and yes even Descartes. But no, he was still just a common colored, someone who just had the exceptional gift of designing and building their dream houses, but who could not ever in a day sit at their dinner tables, or on their galleries, or even piss in their outhouses. It didn’t matter to them either that he had $\frac{1}{4}$ Tunica Indian blood in him. His skin was still too brown to pass their paper bag test at their local Catholic

church. And yes, even though his hair had a slight wave to it, it was still too thick and kinky to pass through their sacred comb with ease.

He remembered his first visit across that creek. That was when Monsieur Sarpy was looking for someone to renovate his old estate. He heard of Elias' good reputation with the Cajuns, and invited him to come meet with him. Elias remembered coming across that bridge over the creek, and stumbling his way through the thick forest of oaks and cedars. The first sign of life he came across was a long line of people waiting outside the Catholic church, St Dymphana's. He had made a ritual of praying before meeting with any prospectful client and following through with any contracts, so he thought nothing of it when he joined in-in the line of people.

It was Saturday, and there was a whole heap of folks lined up to go in. There was a woman and a man making their way down the line, going from one person then to another. The man was holding a paper bag and asked everyone to turn over their right forearm and hold it against the paper bag. If the arm was the color of the bag or lighter, then one was permitted to enter the church.

The woman came down the line gliding the comb through each person's hair. If it took an effort for her to pull the comb through, then one was not permitted into the church. Elias was sickened by the whole mess, but even still he stood- cock-strong against the heavy stares and erratic whispers, awaiting for when the duo would make their way down to him. He wondered what these people would do in such a case where a person would pass one part of the test, and fail the other. Suppose there was someone who had the right shade of skin, but not the right grade of hair, or vice-versa. He didn't know, but what he did know was that something was terribly wrong with these people.

When the woman and man finally reached him, he proudly thrust out his richly brown, sunburnt arm. The man could clearly see, even before holding the bag against it, that the arm was too dark. The olive complexioned man, with bags under his eyes, looked smugly into Elias' face. He disregarded that Elias' features hinted at some notion of Anglo and Native American ancestry. The paper bag did not lie. He was too dark. But the woman grinned sweetly at Elias, something about how his features were thrown together on his face enchanted her. Her grin pushed her cheeks so far up on her face, that her freckles seemed to be fighting to climb over the bottom rims of her eyes. She wasn't even going to bother gliding the comb through his tightly rippled hair, but the olive colored man gave her a slitty-eyed look and a nod of his head, and the woman quickly let loose of her smile and commenced to pulling the comb through Elias' wavy mass.

"You can go on through, Sweetness." The woman said, quickly pulling the comb through with a slight effort. She regained her smile.

"No he can't." The olive colored man said firmly, but calmly.

"He passed the test."

"He did not. I saw that you had a struggle with that comb, yeah. And he ain't passed the bag test neither."

"I say he goes in!" The woman was adamant about this, so much so that she threw her hands onto her narrow hips, and looked as though she was ready to spit fire.

"I will save you both the trouble. I don't need this kinda treatment. I'll worship my God some place else, cause hell ain't the right place to do it no how."

And with that he placed his hat neatly upon his head and walked off. He'd see Sarpy some other time, but for now he had to go off somewhere before his hands could

get ahead of his thoughts. He didn't want the blood of some fool town on his hands, keeping him from reaching Jesus on the Other Side. So he left. And he didn't meet with Sarpy until he had a heart and mind to, and that took all of 365 days, and then some.

Now he was lying here amidst the light of a big cheese-colored moon, nestled up to a woman he couldn't quite figure out. He knew she loved him of course, anyone that would risk the chance of being ex-communicated from their people, and steal off into the night just to be with him had to love him, either that or be stone out of their mind. But he liked to think of her as sane, so the love issue had to be the thing that kept her coming. But was he fooling himself? Could she be just like all the others on her side of the creek?

What if they did marry, and had children? She made it clear to him time and time again that she wouldn't mind having a berry black child. But those were only words spurred on by an active imagination that could not separate real from unreal. He knew of a woman once, a woman named Iris who was as milk-white as any Anglo, but was colored. Iris ran off and eloped with a colored named LeRoi Brown. A year or so after the elopement Iris became with child. Now Iris was a woman who loved her some LeRoi. She was the type of woman to start and finish a good brawl if anyone had a mind to talk harsh of her sweet berry black. LeRoi himself had to contain her a time or two from bashing a Cajun's head into a bloody pulp for talking down to her man. But when her birthing time came, and she saw that little midnight black thing wiggle and push itself out of her with a struggle, it sent her into shock. Iris lay stranded in bed a good three or four months.

Elias did not want to believe that his sweet gentle Dahlia could transform into such, but even still the fear hung heavy in his heart. Only time would reveal such an answer, and just the mere thought of waiting pained him even more.

“What you thinking about?”

Her soft voice startled him. He had forgotten that he was lying there, and that she was nestled up under him. He pulled her closer and tried to forget what was haunting his conscience. He found refuge in the blue of her eyes. Somehow they quieted him. Even though they were the eyes of White men, they had a redeeming quality about them that he could not quite place a finger on.

“I’m not thinking of nothing, Baby Doll.” He tried his best to sound convincing, but wasn’t. He knew it, and she knew it. She wouldn’t press him about the matter though, for it was not in her nature to beat and pull hidden things out of people. If something was kept hidden then it was done so by the will of God, and what would it look like for her to be questioning The Maker?

In a whisper she asked him to sing her to sleep. To her, his voice caught up in song, was always a comforting thing, and somehow by the certain rise and fall of his voice he could convey to her every inner thing that was either tearing him apart, or hypnotizing him with a soothing spell.

And so they lay- so caught up in one another that they did not even realize that Precious was standing just outside, peeping through the cabin window, casting shadowy eyes on them.

Chapter

5

She did everything short of beating her, and even that temptation alone was something that had to be violently wrestled off. But God how she did punish her- locked her up in her room for hours at a time, and left sparse trays of food at her door. She had a servant girl guarding her room from the inside, and a couple of male servants posted at various stations outside, to keep guard over the girl from sun up to sundown, making sure that she did not sneak out and have any unauthorized visitors.

Her half-brother Ambrose was the only one, outside of her parents and servants, allowed to visit her, especially seeing how her Maman still had plans for the two to wed, irregardless of whether she would bear that common colored's child or not.

These visitations from Ambrose were the only things, outside of her thoughts of her dear Elias, which gave her some semblance of being alive.

Ambrose was a tall young man of fifteen. He and Dahlia were three years apart in age. They shared the same father, but not the same mother. Ambrose was conceived by a lonely servant woman by the name of Peony. Peony looked after the Fountainebeus, and the rearing of their daughters for all of twenty years. Dahlia's father had a sore spot

in his heart for the dear servant woman for as long as he could remember. And everybody and their grandmother knew that he loved her more than he could ever love his own wife. But bloodlines and culture separated them, and forbade them to share anything beyond a pipedream of ever being together, that is at least openly.

They did however remain devoted to one another, even after his marriage to Dahlia's Maman. Though done secretly, it was devotion all the same. He even went so far as sleeping in separate beds from his wife, but too often in the deep of night Madame Fountainbleu would somehow ease her way over to where he slept. So in response to this he moved to the next room, then down the hall, and eventually up to the attic, where he could escape the dull, sobbing sounds of what she called her sorrow.

The only times they shared the same bed was when it seemed right, from society's standpoint that they birth another child. Madame Fountainbleu longed ever so deeply for a boy-child, but God had only given her girls. And it was because of this simple fact that she became to feel as though she was cursed. It was bad enough that she couldn't secure the affections of her own husband, but it was even worse that she could not make herself a son to take her absent husband's place.

But ironically enough it was Peony who was to bear Monsieur Fountainbleu a son, and it was for this reason that Madame developed an even stronger distaste for her. And she had a mind to cast that same hatred upon the child, for many a night she lay sleeplessly in her bed, contemplating whether or not to smother the child in his sleep. But by the grace of God she did not. And it so happened that the more and more she caught sight of the child, he reminded her of her dear husband. Peony had spat out another Thaddeus—she had to give that to her. And as time drew on, Madame began to

realize more and more that God was lifting the curse from her, for He had given her a son through the womb of her servant woman, just as he had blessed Rebecca with a son through Hagar.

So feeling that the curse had been lifted, that she had been cleansed and redeemed, she took the infant Ambrose into her own home, and raised him upright in the sustenance and stability of his father's Afro-Franco tradition. No stepson of hers would be raised across the creek amidst animals. She made sure that he had the best in schooling, society, and strong Catholic morals. She saw to it that he grew up alongside his half-sisters as though he were fully of their same blood.

It was not long before Dahlia developed this same enchanted love for Ambrose. She was only just making three when he was born, but she kept close to his nursemaid, and it wasn't long before she began helping the servant care for the child. She closely watched how the woman nursed him, changed his undergarments, and played all silly types of goo-goo games with him. She saw too her Maman's loving adoration of the child, and felt a bit left out. So it wasn't long before she herself began imitating the nursemaid's maternal actions. And she found that she could do everything for the boy, save for popping a nipple in his mouth.

Now their roles had been turned, and it was he who had to do the looking after her. His frequent visits to her chambers was more medicine than any doctor could ever prescribe.

He would sit by her bedside to fan her or run a cool towel across her face. The closed off room was stuffy and horridly infected with heat. The door was now always kept shut and locked, and the windows were nailed down and sealed with paint.

“Oh that towel feels so good, cher. Make me hurt some kind of awful for some sweet water. Make me dream too of my Elias...”

“You got a true love in your heart for him, no?” Ambrose dipped the cloth once more into the bowl of cool water. His chestnut eyes seemed to dance in the sunlight.

“Yeah, I love him. So what of it?”

“Well why your Ma want us to marry? You don’t want me, no.”

She suffered up a faint laugh, her left palm weakly clapped against his knee, “No, no, cher. It ain’t that way, no...I loves you plenty, but not in the same way a woman loves her other half.”

“Go on and run off with him then.”

“T’ain’t that simple. You forget we got a bear standing in between us.”

“Bear can’t follow you everywhere.” He gave a soft wink of his eye.

“T’ain’t strong enough, nor wise enough to fight no bear.”

“Ah, you selling yourself short now. I know you. You used to be the one to fight all them colored boys from cross that creek off of me.”

Dahlia suffered up another laugh, then lifted herself up so that all of the weight of her upper body rested against her elbows supporting her against her pillow. If she stretched her mind a bit, she could conjure up the scent of those wildflowers surrounding her as she lay beneath the gentle weight of Elias’ frame. She wondered where he was now, what he was doing and thinking, if she was tugging at his heartstrings. It had been a good two weeks since her Maman confined her to her chambers and forbade her to see or hear from him.

“He sent you this.” Ambrose said in a quick whisper. His voice startled her somehow. The quiet within her had made her almost forget that he was there.

Ambrose covered his mouth with his index finger, as though to shush her, for the servant was just outside of the door, no doubt eavesdropping.

Dahlia slowly took the small sheet of paper, and delicately unfolded it. “I will see you soon”, it read. Dahlia looked up at Ambrose. They shared a silent grin. It was clear now that he had voluntarily deemed himself as their intermediary. And it was he who arranged for Elias to slip quietly into the house, in the deep of night, while Madame Fountainebleu was too far off in dreamland to even notice or care.

He’d make promises to the servants who guarded over Dahlia, promising them money, a shot of liquor, a piece of velvet, an extra dinner plate here and there- anything they so desired, just as long as they agreed to keep quiet about the late night goings on.

He’d leave Dahlia and Elias up in a vacant room on the second floor, where they'd talk about this and that while Elias rubbed and rubbed her belly. He’d sweet talk her about how finer she looked as fat than she did thin. Then they would get to laughing and wrestling with one another, and soon after the floor would begin creaking underneath the pressure of their crushing bodies.

Thoughts of these moments, and the assurance that they would be relived as soon as the next nightfall, helped her suffer with more ease those closed off moments she lay locked up in her chambers.

It didn't take much time for Precious Dolby to piece together what was going on. She thought it was mighty odd that Dahlia had stopped putting up a fight about being locked away. It wasn't natural. So Precious took to spying around on Elias. She caught him stealing off into the night far too often for her liking. One night she made sure to follow him. And sure enough she found that her suspicions were right. He was crossing across that creek to go see that yellow hussy. And as one might imagine it didn't take her long before she decided to share this new information with Madame Fountainbleu.

At first Madame was taken aback, and didn't or rather couldn't believe her own flesh and Ambrose would go through such desperate measures to betray her.

"You sure of this, gal?"

"Yes'm. I seen that boy Ambrose sneak him in after hours. They all took up to that second floor to Miss Jacqueline's ole room. Then Ambrose slipped out, and them two commenced to tearing into one another like coons in heat."

Madame turned this horrid image over in her mind, it sickened her, "And what you doing slipping into my house yourself? I been told you to stop spying on her?"

"Well, I just thought you ought to know something of this nature. Ain't that what you told me to do in the first place?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go now. I gotta think on this a spell." The old woman gave several desperate waves of her hand, "GO NOW."

Precious turned to leave, happy that she had twisted yet another knife into the yellow hussy's back. But as she reached for the doorknob, something struck her within, alerting her to how she could twist the knife even further.

“Before I leave, Madame, I feel it best that I tell you that I know a sure fire way to separate them two for good.”

Madame was hesitant for a moment, but then she let loose of her anxieties. She figured it couldn’t hurt to listen, “Do tell, do tell.”

“Well, they got this conjure woman I know of. She live just back of the way. She got herbs and roots for every ailment. She can fix you up a sack or two, and just about can whip up any ole spell.”

Madame entertained the thought, but told Precious that she would have to sleep on it a night or two.

Eventually she came around to seeing things Precious’ way, this of course urged on by a sack Precious took the opportunity to stash away underneath the old woman’s mattress.

“When can you take me to her?”

“Oh Madame, you don’t wanna go see her. You let me go on and handle everything. I’ll have her fixed up with something right nice.”

“I say you take me to her, and that’s that. I may be mad, but I ain’t gonna let some fool pickanenny and conjure woman mess over my blood.”

Precious saw that she could not convince the old blue veiner otherwise, so she put up no further protest about the matter. And she took Madame off across the creek the very next day to visit with Ma Sabine.

Ma Sabine lived on the outskirts of Backwaters, on the opposite end from the creek and railroad tracks. From her back porch one could see the Cajun sugar mills puffing out the sweetest smelling smoke God ever crafted.

The old maple-nut colored woman lived such a close distance away from the Cajuns that she found herself many a time yelling at their youngin to stop playing in those ditches outback, just feet away from her yard. And on an occasion or two, had to nearly fight some of them off from trespassing on her land. Oftentimes they would sneak into the woman's yard on a dare. They would make bets about who would be so bold as to trespass on that witch's land, and live to tell about it.

It became for them a local rite of passage, which reaped for them the reward of ultimate manhood, along with the soothing offer of cheating other boys out of their most favored possessions- silver coins, penny candy, sling shots, dice, tobacco, and if one was really lucky they got passed down to them the town's only known of authentic cowboy hat. It had been rumored some time back that a famous known outlaw, who'd taken refuge in their small town, left it behind as a token of gratitude. Boys found themselves doing all sort of back flips and backbiting for the chance to have possession of the prized piece for a full year, and that meant not only trespassing into the witch's yard, but running onto her porch, knocking on her door, and calling her a devil nigger to her face.

Ma Sabine's house was a little squat establishment, and one didn't even have to get good inside of the gate, to pick up the strong stench of evil brewing within. Ma Sabine was no regular root worker. Folks were so scared of her visage that they truly believed she had gone to hell and back again.

Some root workers and healers did nothing but good works and worked in the company of God, but not Ma Sabine. She would whip up a sack to kill you in a minute if it meant she would get merit for it. In The City, New Orleans, they had a name for such type of folks. In The City they were called Low Down Dirty Papas, because it was mostly male root workers who carried out the evil. They'd throw an evil something on your spirit without a second conscience. The female root workers oftentimes were too sympathetic in nature to cast such devilment. But Ma Sabine didn't care. She would tell anybody in a minute that she was proud of being a Low Down Dirty Mama. She was so low that she would work a spell on a certain somebody for you, and in the same blink help that same somebody throw a fix on you.

When Madame Fountainbleu and Precious arrived on her porch, the old woman gave them no real greeting. She simply opened the door and retreated to the back of the house, and they followed. Madame was wondering what the old woman kept hidden underneath the red and mustard colored turban of hers. She imagined she must have had a head full of worms for hair, for she recalled as a child the many Greek myths her Papa Daniel used to tell her about women who had serpents for hair.

The woman took them to a back, closed off room, where an altar with candles and various other cards and objects rested in each corner. In the center of the room was a table, overflowing with various bones, graveyard dust, dead things, strings, ribbons, lit candles, and several dusty books—among other things.

“I understand you need root work.” She looked straight past Precious and into Madame Fountainbleu’s eyes.

“Yes, that’s correct.” Madame could feel her voice trembling. She felt outside of herself. The strong smells of the house were finally getting to her- made her head, heart, and soul ache. She wanted nothing more than to just tear out of there, but something from within told her that she had already entered and could not look back.

“Who you want the work done on? Him or her?”

Precious volunteered an answer, “Her.” Then she sensed Madame’s eyes crawling all over her, “I mean him, or rather both of them.”

Ma Sabine did not take her eyes off of Madame.

“Him.” Madame heard herself say. She felt so much outside of herself in this place.

“How long you want the fix to last?”

Ma Sabine commenced to mixing up various powders, and lighting the central candle at each of the four altars.

“How long do you suggest?” Madame asked.

“Don’t be askin me. You the one that want the fix. You know how long you want the thing to last.”

Madame looked at Precious, at that moment she felt like strangling her for pulling her into such an establishment. Her anger towards the servant girl was so strong that she felt like throwing a fit on her.

“I don’t want no harm done to him or her.” Madame finally let out, “Just make it so that they split apart.”

A bitterness hung on Precious’ face. She was hoping for something more spectacular than a mere simple splitting apart. Something in her longed for the casting down of fire, the sprouting of boils, overpouring of sores—disfigurations, lacerations, and the like.

Ma Sabine tuned the two women out and commenced to mixing, and dipping ribbons in and out of various powders and oils, and folding them over and over again, while chanting something in some unrecognizable tongue.

A sickness seemed to crawl all over Madame Fountainebleu throughout the whole ordeal. A heavy weighing took hold of her heart, a heaviness she knew she would take to her grave, and of which she wouldn’t know how to explain to God. She only wished that He would eventually forgive and understand that she was only looking out for her baby girl, but more and more as the days and weeks passed, she found herself falling deeper and deeper underneath of yet another curse.

The old woman’s deepest wish came true. Dahlia and Elias were split apart for some reason they themselves could not quite put a finger on. An argument about

marriage one night sprawled them into a heated battle of words. He wanted to marry her in Lafitte, in their sacred Catholic church, in front of all those watchful disapproving eyes. But no, she wanted a quiet elopement- a midnight ceremony beneath a lemon-colored moon, in no other place but Jud Tabineaux's front yard. She was ashamed of him, he convinced himself. And he truly did not love her, of this she was certain. They could not agree for the life of them, but they both became to sense that all those long months, they had each mated with a stranger.

They were so angry that not even a baby could bind them. So they split apart. Madame had gotten her wish, only now she wished she could throw it back, for something odd had happened, something that she had not figured on. Something sent her baby girl running off to find refuge across that creek never to return.

Precious had gotten her wish too. Elias was no longer bound in love to Dahlia, but she had not anticipated that he would physically pick up and move off, and now he had drifted so far away from her that she could not even cut a lock of his hair so Ma Sabine could bound him to her.

And....

Inside Dahlia's womb, a quiet baby swished around,
desperately clinging onto her umbilical cord,
it now
being his only true attachment to her, for with his
Grandmaman's spell, Dahlia's love
for him quickly
fizzled
out....

Part II

Miss Abby Rubins

She ain't been the same since her other half picked up and went off. As a matter of fact, the one being tried ain't been the same either. Don't ask me how I know this, I just do. Just because that boy was a baby in the womb, when that whole mess started, doesn't mean he didn't know what was going on-on the outside. Babies can pick up on sadness just as much as they can pick up on joy. And Lawd knows Dahlia let out enough sadness, when Elias left, to carry her and ten somebody else's over into the next lifetime.

Her Ma used to come visit her every once or so. Guilt brought her over that creek and across them tracks. You could see it all in her eyes. She was coming to ease the grief in her baby girl, but Lawd only knows she stirred up more sadness and resentment than anything else. Madame didn't like coming to our side of the tracks, no. Everybody and God knew that. Like I said, what drew her our way was guilt. She would look at you real quick-like. If she knew you well, she would give you a dignified nod, to signify "Hello" or "How do?" whichever way you had a mind to take it, and then she would go about her way. If she didn't know you, she would just keep a kicking without even acknowledging that you existed.

She nodded at me of course, because her family and me go way back. I doctored and brought so many of them into this world that they can't help but treat me like I'm near kin. Anyways, she used to come to that gal's house every now or so and make her sit and entertain her out on that front porch. I guess that little house's insides were too

hot for her liking. Either that or, or it was too humble a place for someone of her dignified nature to be ever caught in or associated with. Whatever the case, they would be sitting out there.

As one might suspect, it was Madame who did all of the talking. Dahlia would nod or shake her head every now and then in response to a question directed to her, but other than that-that gal kept her eyes throwed somewhere beyond that porch. Her arms and hands would cradle her belly, but not in the way of a Ma. It was more like she laid them there out of convenience than anything else. It was some sad sight to see, I tell you that, to see such disconnectedness and all.

The way she sat in the courtroom behind that boy reminded me of her porch sittings. Seem like she was there, but not really there. And you could tell that-that boy felt the same thing, because he would look back at her every once or so, just to make sure she was still there and breathing.

Everyday, without failure, she would be sitting there behind him, like a second shadow- looking as good and fresh as ever. Her hair would be slicked back into a tight bun, and she would have her hat tilted just so it covered enough of her face to hint at a bit of mystery. She would hold her head in much of the same dignified manner that her son had, something that had come natural to the Fountainbleus and those of their kind. And her bowed legs would be crossed at the ankles, and nestled a tad bit to the side, with her hands neatly resting on her lap. The look in her eyes was distant. It was a look that left you with an emptiness and heaviness all in the same blow. One couldn't mistake her disinterest as a lack of love however. It was more like she was steeped too much in the sorrows of her own heart, to even begin to worry about those of her son's.

Seem like to me there was more being put on trial, all them weeks, than just the mere fact that a boy loved a girl so much that he felt he had to kill her, and justice had to be sought. Something heavier was being put to question, weighed, looked at, poked into, and flipped over once and then again. It was more than a dead girl, and a confused boy. That heavy something was what brought the colored and the white folk too, to that little lean-to of a courthouse. It wasn't something that we adored or was attracted to, but something that was significant enough that it kept us twisting and turning in the deep of night- made us more irritable and thirstier than usual, and left us with this feeling of wanting. It was something that no one could place a finger on, but something that we all wanted to get over with and resolved so we could sink back into our old selves, and let life flow as normal. But this thing was blocking our path, stopping our breath, and making us sit down and think more than we would have liked to. For folks around our parts, thinking slowed down the pace of life. It got in the way of things- made folks move around much slower. Work couldn't get done proper like, and sometimes too much thinking stirred up bad thoughts- made you want to change things that were intended to be such and such a way, or assign answers to questions that really weren't the right answers at all. And when you found out those answers weren't the right ones that you thought they were, they would either give you a good slap in the face and make you feel more stupid than you had started out, or send your mind to conjuring up more questions and answers to get you even more confused and dazed. That was what this thing was doing to us all. And us going to that trial was our way of seeing to it that this thing was buried for good.

It's strange to say, but there was one thing out of this whole mess that we all came

to know, and that was the fact that he loved that gal. In his own sick, twisted way, you could tell that he loved Sojourner. It was evident in his eyes, as he sat there in that courtroom all dignified like. You could tell by the tenderness in his face that all the while he was turning pictures of her and “them” over and over in his mind. He had a heavy sort of love for that gal. One of them thick graveyard sort of loves. The kind that make you so scared you can’t make a step without looking behind you, or let out a breath without whispering a prayer up to Him above- hoping and praying that-that person’s love won’t smother you in your sleep, drown you in your washtub, or wrestle you to death in the light of day or the deep of night, or anywhere else in between.

It was like he wasn’t even there at times. It made us feel like we weren’t there either. Seem like he erased all of us from his mind to make room for his one and only. Seem like at those times, him and his Ma were on the same level without either of them even knowing it. Every now or so he would pull himself back into reality, though. That’s when he would turn around to look at his Ma, or give us spectators this glossy stare.

He was out of it, but his lawyer didn’t seem to care. That white man wasn’t studying about winning no case for a colored boy. He was just there to show his face, put on a show of words, and get out of there as soon as possible. He could care less whether Acanthus was sentenced to the chair, life imprisonment, or set free. Winning a colored’s case wouldn’t be any notch in his belt. It was only something to give him practice so he didn’t lose his “skill”, and something to tie him over until he could get some big white folk’s case, which would make or break him.

To tell you the truth, I don’t know what to make of this whole mess. Folks take it

that I can relate to those two better than anyone else this side of living, seeing how I helped bring them into this world, and am the onliest person to get as “close” to them as I did. But the truth of the matter is I don’t know any more about them than the next person....

Chapter

6

There are years that pass by without a single notice, years that could come and go again and still not be missed. But 1927 was not one of those years—at least not for the folks in Backwaters. That was the year they thought Jesus had come and gone. Heaven had opened up its gleaming gates, but all what followed seemed like hell come to surface. They thought it was the end. Water covered every inch of their lives and left no room for breathing. It rained all of that April and didn't let up until June. It rained in their waking and in their sleeping, in their going out and coming in, through their curses and through their prayers. God was unforgiving was what they figured. They figured he had forgotten about Noah, the ark, olive branch and rainbow, and had finally returned to finish what He started. All hope was lost. They had given themselves up for dead.

When the Red Cross came in their boats to rescue them, most of the black folks didn't budge from their closed up little houses. The white folks did however. They left that place without a second thought or blink, to find refuge in the warm smiles and embraces of distant relatives or whomever else had a mind to take them in until the times got better. But the black folks hardly had any people outside of Backwaters for them to

run off to. All they had were themselves and that place which had witnessed all of their births, bore their sorrows, and kept them hoping and struggling. They figured that the few kin they did happen to have outside of Backwaters, had their own little families to tend to. What would it look like for them to go barging in on folks who weren't any better off than they? So they stayed. If it were meant for them to die, then they would die in the place where they had gotten their beginnings, and they would not die alone. Besides, if it so happened that God would forgive them after all of His tears dried up, they would need each other to lean on, reminisce, and rebuild. So they waited it out.

Among the Red Cross crew that was sent, there was a colored doctor by the name of Maurice O'Behr. When news of the Great Flood had reached him, he was out west in frontier land, along with his wife and daughter. They had moved out west, five years back, in an effort to escape disgruntled whites, who could not muster the thought of a negro doctor and his school teacher wife making a way for themselves in so-called "white folks'" professions. Many a night their sleep was broken by burning crosses cutting into their dreams, or by the sounds of shattered windows, and near hits of bricks, glasses, and whatever else just slightly missing their faces and bodies. That kind of environment was no safe place for his wife and daughter, so with every encounter he picked up his family and moved. They had uprooted themselves so many times, that they could hardly remember where they had gotten their beginnings. Out west was the longest they had stayed in any one place. They had moved to the all black township of Summnerville, which prided itself in catering to a large influx of colored professionals. It was a place of refuge and promise- a place that was free of midnight burnings, and broad day prejudices. Dr. O'Behr and his wife flourished there. He owned and ran his own practice, and she

was the head teacher at the local schoolhouse. Life was good, and getting better. And it was for this very reason that his wife could not figure out why he wanted to return to the South to revisit all of those ghosts they had tried so many years to put behind them.

When the news of the Great Flood reached Summnerville, a month and a half of flooding had already taken place, and the government was beginning to make provisions for all of the states hit. The Red Cross was of course one of the first organizations called in. They had launched a fundraising campaign across the states, encouraging folks to help out the disaster victims as best they could. Monetary and food donations were primary resources, but Dr. O'Behr felt a calling to do more, even if it meant going back to the place which bore his nightmares. He couldn't help but think about all of the poor helpless souls that he had left down South- his folks for one, not to mention countless uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews, and the like. He knew in his heart that "great" Uncle Sam wasn't studying about repairing the lives of its colored victims, as much as he was concerned about tending to the needs of his fair white citizens. So with this in mind he decided to return down South to help his own. It would have been a sin not to. If he hadn't have, he couldn't muster the thought of staring himself or his Maker in the face another day. Passion eats at you like that, and doesn't let go until it is soothed. Besides he was not one much for carrying around guilt, especially the kind that could cross on over with him to the Other Side. He could not live with that thought. But his wife still could not understand. She fought him tooth and nail, arguing that they could get just as much accomplished if they stayed where they were.

"Maurice, those folks aren't gonna give you any medal for going back there. There isn't anything back there for us but pain. Look, we could stay here- organize our

own fundraising campaign- raise lots of money to send back down there. Those folks are going to need food, clothes, starting over money. What can you possibly accomplish by going back down there...You risk the chance of getting killed yourself. And for what?". Now Mrs. O'Behr was a short stocky lady, with smooth reddish brown skin that reminded you of Alabama dirt. She always wore her long wooly, pepper-speckled hair in a puffy ponytail. Her voice was firm and dramatic, and almost potent enough to win over any argument, that is save for this one.

"Folks need something more than money, Adell. Money can't fix everything. We of all people should know that. No, those folks need to look into a face that is much like their own and see hope. Hope can bridge a mighty gap between life and death. I want to give them that hope."

"And you can, you can, Dear- but at a distance."

"You are one unfeeling woman! Have you forgotten about all your people you done left down there- all our people, and you don't wanna do anything about it?"

There was a silence. It was quite odd that Adell was stunned for words. And it was this very silence which confirmed to her dear husband that there was at least some ounce of sense and decency in his argument. With that in mind, there was to be no further discussion, as far as he was concerned. He figured he had won the argument, which was a first in at least two years. Within the next few days he packed up his family, bidden his fellow townsmen a farewell, and set off to wherever The Spirit led him.

Chapter

7

It was like waiting in a tomb, waiting for God or whatever else was supposed to come and take her and her son over to the Other Side. Holding him there in the darkness felt like eternity. All of that water and darkness left no room in her heart or mind for anything else. She and that boy held on to one another as if God and his angels had sewn them together like that from the start. She felt closer to him now than even when he was joined to her in the womb. Fear always has a way of doing that to people.

No one suspected that the rain would not cease. When the first drop fell, Dahlia was out back, scrubbing a load of clothes for Judge Pichot. She had taken up the profession of laundering a few years ago, after gathering up enough courage to refuse any more allowances from her people across the creek. She laundered for blacks and whites alike, but it was mostly the whites who had partaken of her services since they were the only ones in Backwaters who could truly afford the luxury of paying someone else fifty cents a load to do their dirty work. The only black folks in the community that could afford such a luxury were the schoolteacher and preacher, as far as the rest they got by just fine by doing their own.

That day when the first drop of rain fell, Dahlia was working extra hard to get a tobacco stain out of Judge Pichot's favorite white shirt. After some time of vigorously

scrubbing the stubborn stain, she felt a fat drop of water splatter against the crown of her head, but she didn't pay it much mind, for she figured it must have been the result of her scrubbing. But then another drop fell, it was much heavier and fatter than the one that proceeded it, then another followed, and another, and shortly thereafter she was being pelted by drops of rain that felt like needles poking into her flesh. She looked up at the sky, how deceptive it was. The sun was shining full bloom, brilliant like a gold piece anchored into a blue satin ribbon colored sky. She quickly ran and gathered the clothes drying on the line, and put the washtub and washing board on the back porch. Then she ran off in search of Acanthus. On her way up the road she came across Miss Abby, who was walking hastily towards the direction of her house, with a thick stack of newspapers nestled atop her head,

“Lawd chile, you need to be inside. What you doing out here?” She looked up at the sky as if to analyze it, “That devil is sho beating his wife some kinda merciful.”

“I’m looking for that boy of mine. Can’t never keep up with him, no... You haven’t seen him, have you, Miss Abby?”

“No’m...can’t catch a holt of that gal Charletta Mae either..I suppose they off somewhere getting into devilment...She’ll come home sooner or later I suppose, once she get tired of God whoopin her with his tears. I ain’t studying about her whereabouts no ways. She too hard headed. Weren’t supposed to be out playing no how.”

“Well, I’ll send her home if I come across her, Miss Abby. You get in now.”

“Yes Lawd, I sho am. You do the same once you find that boy. He can’t be too far off.”

Dahlia searched everywhere for Acanthus, and he was nowhere to be found. It wasn't until she came across Pap Mirro that she was guided in the right direction.

“Lass I seen he and that gal of Mama Mae’s was out yonder at Winbush Hills, eating on that dirt like there weren’t no tomorrow. Yeah, Baby, that’s lass I saw of them.”

Out there in that dirt was where she found them alright. They must have finished their feast of dirt a good time ago, because when Dahlia walked up on them, they were running around chasing each other. The rain had become more than just a mere drizzle by then, and there was much less light in the sky. The sun folded itself beneath a cluster of fluffy greyness and the world seemed dead. It seemed dead save for the jovial laughter coming from the two overgrown children frolicking around in dirt, which was slowly transforming itself into mud. Both Acanthus and Charletta Mae were consumed in an intimate happiness and detachment, that most folks only dream of. It was a feeling that Dahlia thought she once had, or at least came close to, and now wished she had again. She felt an ache within, an emptiness. She thought of Elias- her dear one, long gone. Sometimes she thought what they had was merely a dream, and what she was living now was a nightmare.

There were times when she could not shake him from her thoughts. The thoughts were so powerful that he would sometimes come to her as an apparition. Or at times his voice would ring out so loudly that she could swear he was present. On many occasions she would catch herself running out into the middle of the road towards him, because his visage would appear so boldly. But little did she know that it was only the sun hitting the road at the wrong angle, and the ghosts of the past catching up with her. There would be

times when she would respond to the sound of his voice while out there in the yard scrubbing the day's wash. Folks would hear and see her little episodes. Most mistook her for crazy, and others couldn't feel anything but sorrow for her. She wanted so much to disprove their misconceptions. She wanted them to know that what she was seeing and hearing was indeed real. But once folks' minds are made up, it's mighty hard to convince them otherwise.

Chile, that's her people that got her like that- their crazy upbringing. They try so much to distance themselves off from us true bloods that it drives them mad.

Yes Lawd, God sho don't like ugly, and He'll make it so that-that ugly catch up wit you some way.

Umm-hummn, it'll eat you alive alright, every man has his due, every man.

I pities her though, po thing. She ain't never got over him.

Shoot she ain't the only one been pining. He done broke plenty a heart...looka that gal, Precious. She sho nuff ain't been the same since he left either.

Make you wonder what kinda a magic he got. That's some kinda scary, when a man got that much power that he take yo life.

I ain't never witness that kinda man or magic in all my days. And from the looks of what it do, don't want to either.

Yes Lawd, give me ordinary any day, daily bread is all I need- none of that fancy stuff.

That was how the talk went when Dahlia wasn't around. And those were the

types of thoughts swirling around in their heads, even when she was in their presence. And as one might suspect, it made that boy's life even more of a hell. What little time he did go to the schoolhouse, he was taunted for who his mother was, who he was, and where he had come from- not to mention the fact that he had been abandoned by a father, who must have been so disgusted by the thought of him, that he fled town before he even made it out of the womb.

Many a day Acanthus would be thrown out of the schoolyard for fighting in defense of his Ma. And even though he did all of that fighting for her, she seemed unmoved by it. This was the thing that made him saddest. He wanted her love, but she was unyielding.

“Canthus, you and Charletta need to come out of this rain now, before the both of you catch a sickness.”

Dahlia was still a beautiful woman, but when one looked into her face it reminded one of a deathly beauty- the kind that you see on the faces of those laid away in coffins, or the faces of those restless spirits who are trapped between this world and the next. Her eyes even lost their liveliness. That rainbow of blue they once radiated, now resembled melted ice. They would either make you sad, or mad enough to hit her and knock her out of her misery. That's one of the other reasons most folks avoided her, or at least avoided looking into her eyes when they spoke to her. And this was all the more reason why Acanthus tried at best to love her and be loved back.

“Did you two hear me? I said come on out of this rain, before you catch something that won't shake loose.”

The two overgrown children stopped their silly game of tag-and-run, and followed Dahlia like two chicks as she led them home. But all the while they continued their silly play by making goofy faces at one another and whispering nonsense. They found comfort and safety in one another because they considered themselves cut off from everyone else, for they considered themselves pariah, and their only means of survival was preying off of each other. In some ways this was healthy, but in other ways it was dangerous. But they were too connected to know any better.

The first night of the storm, life went on as usual for the two at 1011. While his Ma prepared supper, Acanthus pumped two buckets of water out back, one for the supper dishes, and the other for his Ma's evening bath. The rain did not bother him much, in fact it made him feel cleansed. He stayed out there as long as his Ma would allow, with his arms stretched up to the heavens and his mouth held wide open to taste the soft rain. It was only his Ma's beckoning that forced him to depart from the peaceful moment. Upon hearing her call, he picked up the buckets and headed in.

"Now look at you, you got rain water mixed in with the tap water. I don't know what I'm going to do with you...and now your hair's all wet." She gently wiped away the rain residue from his forehead, and slicked back the glossy loose curls from his face, "I tell you, 'Canthus, you are a handful."

Acanthus just looked up at her and smiled, he cherished this small moment of attention from her.

“Gimme these buckets and you go change into some dry clothes.”

“Yes’m.”

After changing his clothes, he laid the wet ones on the floor in front of the fireplace, then he went back into the kitchen to assist his mother with chores- getting items out of the icebox upon her request, clearing the counter tops of food particles and spills, stirring the contents of pots, and taking items to and from the wrought iron, pot-bellied black stove, nestled in a quiet corner of the kitchen. This was how it was every evening at 1011. Dahlia believed that rearing her son as such would make him a better man, that it would make him more balanced than most of the other young boys in the community who never stepped inside of a kitchen except for those times when they were called to supper. Dahlia did not want her son to be one sided. She did not want him to be immersed in the belief that men had certain roles and women took the left-overs. She wanted him to know that there was an equilibrium amongst the sexes, for this was the mindset of his father and of her precious brother Ambrose. Her son would be no different, she was determined of that. But what she did not realize was that, rearing him as such was making him soft. And it was this growing softness that made him even more disliked by mostly all of the other children in town.

Dahlia always dressed the table properly, it was a habit of her upbringing. At their humble dinner table, supper was consumed in silence, save for those moments when Dahlia questioned Acanthus about his day at school, or scolded him for devilment he had gotten himself into, or when he had some deep probing life questions he needed answered. After they had eaten, Dahlia tidied the front of the house and left the kitchen cleanup to her son. He prepared her bath. The tin tub was always placed near the stove,

so that she could consume as much of the left over heat from the cooking as possible. She was very cold-natured and needed warmth all of the time. Yes, even in the summer, and even more so since her other half took off. Warmth provided her with an artificial security, that's why she spent as much time in the sun as possible, and stayed in the tub until the last ounce of steam hugged itself around her body. The first night of the storm, however cut her bath time short. There was a lot of lightening and thundering, which she was terrified of. She quickly got out of the tub and wrapped herself in a plush white robe, yet another fine garment she had purchased from Rosenstein's Department Store. There could be no doubt that she wasn't her mother's child, for both had a love of fine clothing, and even though Dahlia was living amidst poverty, one couldn't tell by her manner of dress. Her hair and her clothes were her pride and joy, and her worst fear ever was that if she lost either of the two, she would surely die.

"Canthus, bring me my slippers..this floor in here is always so cold."

The boy quickly came to her call, slippers in hand.

"Come dry Mama's hair."

Both went into the living room and sat on the floor next to the fireplace.

Acanthus gently brushed the tangles out of her hair. He hadn't brushed her hair in years, not since Miss Abby had caught sight of him brushing his Ma's hair that one morning ages ago, when he was just a boy of three. The way Miss Abby looked at his Ma and him made him feel violated- made him feel like he had done something unlawful, and should be punished. He did not like that feeling of being accused. Couldn't that old woman see that he was merely paying homage to his Ma? Couldn't she see that brushing his Ma's hair was an act of love? He was so embarrassed by that one moment, that he searched

Miss Abby's face for forgiveness every time after that. That is why he felt a little uneasy, when his Ma beckoned him to dry and brush her hair that first night of the storm. As he knelt behind her, his eyes could not help but wander every now and then to the window and the pulled shade. His deepest fear was that it would roll up, and Miss Abby would see him once more, and he would have to answer to her. Much worse it would cause his Ma to fold even deeper into herself, and they would be locked up away from everyone else for days or weeks even. That was how it was with her- she cut herself off from the world everytime it rejected or questioned her in the least, and the worst thing about it was that she forced him to close himself off too. No, she did not encourage him to do so verbally, but by actions. She made herself so incapacitated when she closed herself off that Acanthus had no choice but to comfort and cater to her. When these episodes struck, he became the parent and she the child. In some ways he cherished those episodes, because they made her need him.

“Why you so quiet, cher?”

“Rain make me quiet, Ma. Sound like God talking to me, and I need to be quiet to listen.”

“You a funny boy.”

For a while there was a long silence. After Acanthus finished brushing and detangling her hair, she gathered the thick mane into her hands, slung it over her left shoulder, and braided it. By the time she changed into her bedclothes, Acanthus had fallen asleep by the fireplace. He missed his bedtime story, usually a Brer Rabbit tale, narrated to him by his Ma, as she remembered them told to her by her Pa, when she was a little girl. She sat Indian-style in front of the fireplace- eyes transfixed to the beautiful

visage of her son. The glow of the fire made him look orange. As he lay there, curled up in that fetal position, he reminded her of her dear Ambrose. She thought of how much she missed him, but she wasn't brave enough to go back across those tracks to visit him. She vowed never to go back over there, not after all her Maman had put her through. So she settled for loving Ambrose at a distance, and chose to remember his face everytime she stared into the face of her son.

As she sat there in front of the fire, with the sounds of thunder clattering in the background, she felt afraid. Even though the fire was blaring and she felt its warmth she was still filled with fear. She always felt afraid when he fell asleep before her, even moreso on a stormy night, for when he was asleep she felt left alone in the world. She could do nothing now but force herself to sleep, and only pray that the rain would be gone by morning.

Chapter

8

The rain was not gone by morning, nor by the next day, or the day after that. It seemed unending. Folks stayed closed off in their houses, waiting for what they thought was the end. Those who had never even cracked open a bible, much less confessed any sins, or experienced the heat of the Holy Spirit touching their souls- found themselves on bent knees, crying their hearts out to Him above to spare them from the forthcoming tragedy.

Each day when daylight hit, the dingy gray light that it was, the men would go out to gather what food and provisions they could bring back to their sorrowed-eyed wives and hunger stricken children. There were some families however who did not have the luxury of having men, and in such cases it would be the women of the household who would go out and bring back necessities to their young.

By the time the waters had risen to knee's length and higher, folks had taken to using their washtubs as means of transportation. For a while they could rely on gathering provisions from Pap Mirro's Five and Dime. But that luxury lasted all of three weeks. By the third week's end, Pap's store had been stripped clean, and there would be no more deliveries, by truck, train, or otherwise anytime soon due to the rain. So folks had to

gather food as best they could. Many went out into the woods to gather blackberries and mushrooms, and if they were fortunate they would come across a dead rabbit, squirrel, or whatever else that seemed edible.

The flood was a misfortune in many respects, but some good did come out of it. And maybe that was what The Maker had intended. Folks who had not spoken to one another in years were helping one another out, and yes even the whites swallowed enough pride to lend a helping hand to the blacks. The air of Death has a funny way of doing that to people. Its raunchy stench is enough to make a sinner turn into a saint.

As one might suspect, it was Acanthus who had to fend for his home front. Each morning he would arise with an unknown vigor. He would kiss his Ma upon her cheek, then scurry off to the kitchen, where he would drag their wash tub from a dark, dusty corner of the room. The metal would make an awful screeching noise against the linoleum floor, a sound which for some reason never seemed to stir the sleeping beauty. With one hand Acanthus would drag the tub, and with the other an old broom. Going out each morning to face the rising waters and gray dome above gave him a sense of importance, for he was tending to the needs of his beloved mother- making sure that she survived what God, nature, or whatever else did not think she could.

His first day's outing however was much to reckon with. He was uncertain of where to go, much less how to get there, considering that his wash tub kept turning him over into the caramel colored water, because he did not know how to hold his weight. That day he had experienced the fiery of more snapping turtles than he could count- his legs and hobbyhorse could attest to that. The outset of his journey made him feel so inept, having never fished or hunted before. It was all new to him, but he had to learn it

fast and on his own, otherwise he would be responsible for his Mama's demise. Thinking of her was what made him stronger and more determined. As a result he learned to balance his small weight in the middle of the wash tub, figured out a way to trap the snapping turtles, and kill the garden snakes with the handle of the broom. And even when Pap Mirro's store was wiped clean of all goods, a voice within led him across the railroad tracks to a place his Ma held much disdain for, and had warned him time and time again never to cross lest she have his hide.

That voice within led him to his people's place. He knew it by its grandeur. He remembered bits and pieces of his Grand Maman and Grand Papa from when they came to visit him and his Mama. He knew that the house they lived in must have been even grander than their fashion of dress. And he was right. The large white house looked like a monument amidst the flood waters- a paradise amidst troubles. Large thick columns flanked a porch fit for a king. And the steps that bayed at the house's entrance were so numerous that even though half were hidden beneath the waters, there were still enough left above water to fool the eye, making one almost believe that the house had been untouched by the flood.

Ambrose was the first to detect the little trespasser. At a distance he thought that he was yet another scrambler trying to come and steal whatever his little hands could manage. Since the flood, many of the plantations had been hit by folks ravaging for food and anything else that was not nailed down. The rains seemed to bring out a brazenness in the lower classes, that made them bold enough to steal what they thought was rightfully theirs. They figured that they were on the road to death anyway, and there wasn't much more harm their bossmen could do to them than what God already had in

store. One bold servant woman was so brazen as to move herself, two children, her husband, and her lover into her Madame's home. The only reason the old Creole woman did not contest was because she was afraid of dying alone. But Madame Fountainbleu did not put up with any such behavior from any of her servants. She ruled her house with an iron fist, not withholding to anyone, no not even to God. If she turned away a hungry mouth, knowing that she had food to spare and then some, she felt no remorse. A recitation of three mysteries of the rosary and a novena to St. Jude would be her recompense was what she figured. Many a night she had even taken to sleeping in her storehouse, with a shotgun ready at her side to shoot anyone who dared raid her pantry. Anyone in her household, whether blood or servant, who did not guard her estate with the same vigor, risked her wrath. So when the little trespasser paddled his way up to the grand white house, Ambrose, Madame's stepson, was ready at the door to turn him away.

Acanthus did not seem threatened by the man's soft demeanor and looked him straight in the eyes as he spoke, especially since the eyes looking down on him looked very much like his own- chestnut browns filled with a hidden ray of sunshine. It was like looking into a mirror,

"Excuse me, Sir, but can you tell me if this is the residence of Madame Fountainbleu?"

The tall yellow man did not hesitate with an answer, his words rolled off his tongue with a tartness, "Yes, this is, but the lady of the house is not receiving any guests. So you best be on your way. Don't stir up any trouble where there is none, now go on". Ambrose's voice rang out thick and sweet, sweeter than a mound of sugar lumped up at the bottom of a glass of iced tea before its stirring. The manner in which he spoke was

like he was trying to cover the sweet with something harder, but with no success. At best his voice resembled a woman trying to disguise herself as a man. Even the way his hands rested at his waist seemed soft and peculiar to Acanthus.

“Sir, I’m her grandson. I just came to see if she had any food for my sick Mama.”

There was a silence for a moment as Ambrose searched the boy’s face for some resemblance of his sweet Dahlia. It was something about the eyes that convinced him- not the color mind you, for hers were blue, but it was something about their perfect round shape and the way they were evenly spaced away from the aquiline nose. The hardness slowly eased away from Ambrose’s face as he saw more and more of himself in the boy. He released a lazy smile,

“Don’t tell me you are my Dahlia’s boy. My, look at you. I should have known you were kin from the start, cher- got my eyes staring right back at me. Aren’t you precious, a lil me... You come on in. I’m gonna fetch Maman for you.”

“Where can I put my boat? Can’t leave it out here, it’ll float away, then I won’t have no ways home.”

“Sho you right. Let me see.... Maybe you can drag it up on the pouch, and put it tween those chairs... Now I would help you but I got to spare these hands for my piano playing- one wrong move and the talent is gone, then what would ole Ambrose do for a living?”.

Acanthus did not pay the sly-tongued man much mind. He secured the wash tub between the two chairs on the east wing of the gallery, and waited for the man to lead the way into the house. He seemed a little apprehensive to follow. The door of the

establishment seemed to be the mouth of a great white monster waiting to devour him whole. His heart leaped from his little chest with each step he took.

The house within was lifeless- just waiting for someone to put it out of its misery. Acanthus could tell that it had been some time since it had welcomed a child. Everything was too neat and perfect. And there seemed to be a shadow of grayness oozing from the walls that melted over the furniture, a grayness that could not be scrubbed away by the even the harshest of wash cloths- a grayness that had well settled in years before the storm's advent. There was no love there, no pitter patter of little feet, no laughter – all life seem buried deep within the walls, never to resurrect again.

“You stay here, little one, I'll go get, Maman.”

Acanthus watched Ambrose's graceful retreat to the back of the house. His stride was like that of a prancing pony's. Acanthus did not move from his spot. The dripping water from his pants and boots created a small puddle beneath his feet and surrounded him, but even still he was reluctant to move. A voice resounding from the darkness in the parlor startled him, he jumped.

“May I help you?” It was a velvety woman's voice, mixed with hardness of years and sadness. The silhouette moved slowly out of the shadows, as if drifting out of the gray like a newly resurrected spirit. She wore a maid's hat and was dressed in a long black dress, with a white apron tied about her trim waist. Her face resembled a satin midnight's lucid blackness wrapped around a well-proportioned skeleton. Something about her eyes was reminiscent of his own Ma's, yet he could not place a finger on what it was that reminded him so. There was an air of burden that preceded her. She moved closer to him, she thought her eyes were playing tricks on her,

“You Dahlia’s boy? What you doing over this a way? Can you talk boy?”

There was a pause as Acanthus searched her face, looking for what he did not know,

“Yes, Ma’am. I can talk.”

“Then what you doing on this side?” She put her hands firmly on her hips.

“I came to see my Maman.” His legs trembled for some unknown reason.

“Oh,” The woman said. “Oh.” She repeated, feeling stupid. Her hands relaxed themselves and in nervousness she smoothed her apron,

“You must forgive me. We’ve had so many trespassers now a days. Folks gone mad, stealin from the Missus. And everybody else. It’s hard to tell who’s friend or stranger. Come, let me sit you down.” She stretched out her hand. He was hesitant to trust his own hand in hers.

“You ain’t scared my color gone jump off on you, is you? “

Acanthus quickly shook his head, then placed his hand gently into hers. She led him to a burgundy, brilliantly gold embroidered chair in the parlor that looked too fragile to even look at.

“Has anybody fetched the Missus For you?

“Yes, Ma’am. A tall yellor fellow.”

“Sweet-talkin?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Oh, that ain’t nobody but Ambrose. That be your uncle boy. You look like you hungry. We got some extry biscuits from the morning meal. You like some?”

Acanthus nodded without hesitation, and settled a bit in the delicate chair. He watched the woman disappear down the hallway, and heard her greet the madame of the house along the way. His heart began to thud fast again. He was afraid that the woman he knew as his Grandmaman would chew him out for making a mess of her fine Maplewood floor. Her arrival to the parlor seemed the longest minute of his life. Grandmaman was a portly pale woman with sharp features. Her chin seemed to resemble softly kneaded dough, and her manner of dress was nothing short of grand. She wore a silk white blouse with a frilly collar. A broach shaped in the form of a diamond -studded bouquet rested at her neck, in a manner that seemed to choke her fat rolls of chin. Acanthus slowly peeled himself out of the chair.

“My cher- you have grown into quite the young man.” The hardness left her face, and she moved closer to him. She let her fingers glide gently through his loose ginger curls, “You are the spitting image of Ambrose, yeah. What brings you to our parts? Your Ma alright?”

“No, Ma’am. She’s not taking to the storm well.”

“That’s my Dahlia alright. She never took too well to storms at all. She’s not deathly sick is she?”

“No, Ma’am, but she could stand some food.”

“Darling don’t you worry your lil head about that- I’ll have Precious prepare you a basket.”

“We don’t need too much. Our washtub can’t hold too much weight, Ma’am.”

“I won’t have no grandchile of mine calling me out of my name. You call me Gram or nothing at all.”

“Yes, Ma’am- I mean Gram.”

She took and pressed the boy close to her. He could hear the slow thump-thump of her old heart. She smelled of old people, a scent of time and dust.

“Oh mon cher, I never thought I’d see the day you’d come to see me, no.”

Looking down at him, she studied his face, “Such a handsome boy. Look like Ambrose spit you out. But that’s how blood be, yeah. It been a long time since I seen your Mama last.”

“She’s not so well- been real sick since the storm.”

“Yes, yes- that be my Dahlia, yeah. Weren’t never partial to storms. They always scared the heavens out of her.

The midnight colored woman shortly returned with a small sackcloth of food, and handed it over to the boy, “They got some biscuits in there, along with some roasted chicken and some other things. That should last you another day or so tween the two of you.

“Thank you, Ma’am”

“You could stay here for suppa you know.” Madame butted in, “I can send for your Ma.’

“No Ma’am. She’s plenty out of it. I best get back to her soon.

“Well, our doors are always open.”

“I thank you kindly.” He nodded to both women, then retreated to the door, with the soles of his shoes squeaking along the way. He was relieved his Grand Maman had not scolded him for wetting her shiny wood floor.

“I can have Ambrose follow you.” Madame threw out in a last hope effort.

“No thank you. I can find my way back. Good evening.”

With that he closed the door behind him, and took a quick peek into the sack. The sight of the oranges made his mouth water. He was tempted to pull one out then and there and devour it, but he felt eyes watching him from the parlor window. He did not want those eyes to think that he was destitute, so he quickly closed the sack and set out for home.

The ride back seemed longer than the ride to. When he reached back home, he made a so at Miss Ruthie’s house, and knocked on Charletta Mae’s window. She was there awaiting his return, for she had seen when he had set out on his journey and longed to go with him, but her Auntie was keeping her prisoner until the rains decided to go their merry way. He gave her a portion of what was in the sack. She of course was very touched that the pretty boy she adored had even thought of her and her growling stomach. She longed to kiss him on the cheek, but knew that he was still too tender in age to take it as a compliment, so instead settled with giving him a sweet-eyed “thank you”. This seemed to confuse him. He left her there and went to tend to his ailing Ma. But Charletta Mae did not leave the window’s side, no not even after she had watched him go through his front door. She was held there by his visage, something so strong and overpowering that it left her too weak to move.

Chapter

9

They prayed over her even though she was still an outsider- even though she had come from a religion that did not know the full power of the Holy Spirit, that could send your soul to dancing and light your tongue on fire with words unknown. Yes, they prayed and prayed hard, because their God would not let them do otherwise.

The boy had come to them in the velvet blueness of the night, knocking from door to door. It was after the tornado hit. What he remembered last was the sound of a train. His young mind mistook it for a new arrival at the town depot. He didn't question for once why the sound was so loud and near, at least not until it wrapped itself around their house and seemed to suck and lift them up as if it were the mighty hand of God Himself. For a moment the noise seemed to stir his Ma into consciousness, but soon after she was knocked back into that secret world behind her eyelids- a place she had been held captive of since the flood's advent. He was certain that she was gone, but was all the more determined to bring her back. That's when his feet carried him outside. He didn't need the washtub that night to take him where he needed to go. Somehow his little frail legs moved him through the thick waters.

The houses all looked liked floating coffins, but the might of his knock was determined to raise the dead therein just long enough to bring his Ma to. And they rose. Some hesitated, yes, because they didn't know whom to expect on the other side. Those

who had lived their lives liberally were certain it was the devil. Even the holy ones, who lived and walked on the straight and narrow, feared the knocker would be the One they had been preparing to meet all of their lives. Fear has a way of doing that to you. It can make you so scared that you reject the good along with the bad. But the determination of the knock, that persistent banging, made them arise and answer the poor child.

The first house he went to was Miss Ruthie's. Her nerves were shaken enough by what had just passed over her house, and now there was someone or some thing calling her to her door. She opened it slowly, the knob seemed to turn for a lifetime before it clicked out of its nook. The poor boy's heart was doing everything short of leaping out of his chest and falling at the feet of the wide-eyed woman. He saw nothing, save her silhouette, a matronly figure with hunched over shoulders, bent by years of hard labor and birthing other folks' babies. When the door fully opened, and the old woman's eyes did not see someone standing there at her eye level, the little life she had left in her almost released itself. But then she heard a voice- low and whimpering,

“Please, come help my Mama-“

She looked down and saw Acanthus- such an innocent face soaked in wetness, a wetness that she could not discern whether it was from the rain or tears, though she imagined it must have been a little of both, gathering from the lost hope sound of his plea and the remnants the tornado left behind.

“How she, chile?”

“I can't wake her up...She was up for a minute or so, but then she went back out. Please help us. I can't feel her breathing.”

“Sho chile sho. Go see if you can get me some help. I ain’t so sure I can handle this one on my own if she that bad off.”

The boy flew in one direction, and she in the other. She waded through the water, barefoot and all. There was no time to think about shoes or whatever else. Him above was calling her to do what she did best- to keep life in and darkness out. She had birthed many babies in her lifetime, mostly for the rich colored Creoles over in Lafitte. Dahlia was number 126 in the year of 1899, according to her records. Though that number may be a little offset considering that she hadn’t started keeping record until 1890, when she first learned to read and write. She remembered that gal’s birth well, because that was the year the magnolias were at their finest. Their sweet scent was toxic enough to send you dreaming- toxic enough to make you believe all was right with the world, even though you knew good and well it wasn’t. But a little dreaming never hurt anyone, especially since it was stirred on by the soft milky whiteness of magnolias full in bloom.

It was well after dusk when the Fountainbleus sent for her. The men were all gathered out on Pap Mirro’s porch, exchanging lies. The air was thick, and their tongues were heavy with tales about battles won and loves lost and conquered. You could hear their boasts and laughter the full length of Main Street. It was a comforting sound to most of the black inhabitants, because it was a sound that could not be bottled up or snipped away by the whites or upstanding Creoles, who sought to deprive them of every possession or ounce of dignity. No, there on the storefront and on their porches they could let whatever words fall out as they may. There was freedom in that, sometimes the only freedom they thought they ever had, save in God’s house on Sundays when The Spirit would come upon them.

Miss Ruthie was sitting out on her porch, just settling her feet into a hot bucket of water, when the Fountainbleu's messenger boy, Toby Peters, flashed past Pap Mirro's and headed straight towards her. He was out of breath by the time he reached her. He had to stop himself, rest his hands against his knees, and try at best to put his heart back into place.

"Boy what ails you, running through here like a chicken with its head cut off?"

"She ready, Miss Ruthie..the Missus...ready."

"Well, ain't this somethin. Here my feet still waum from comin from there, and she ready." She pulled her feet from the water and commenced to drying them off with a near by rag. The boy was fighting for his breath.

"They sendin you a ride...I ran all the way here..they sent me to let you know 'fore they got here so you'd know to get together whatever you got to bring."

"Umm-hummn...If they were in such a hurry they'd a rode you ovah here, stead of making you half lose your life..Sat down on them steps and catch yourself...I'ma go on and get my things, holler for me when they come."

Inside, Miss Ruthie gathered her bible, some clean towels, some surgical scissors, and what she called her "record-keeping book". It was merely a stack of parchment paper secured with a string. She used it to record all of her births. The Fountainbleu's baby would be number 126. She whispered a brief prayer to her Maker, a ritual she practiced before all of her deliveries, then went back out onto the porch to wait for her ride. Births were the only occasions when she allowed herself to accept rides from the Creoles, because those were times of extreme emergency, not to mention that her aging legs and feet could not match the speed of a horse-drawn buggy or automobile. Other

than these occasions, her feet carried her wherever she needed to go. Pride and habit reared her that way for as long as she could remember. For as long as she could recall, feet were the only transportation of any colored. Slavery had given them no other choice, and even after Emancipation folks couldn't afford the luxury of a horse to take them to and fro, so they were forced to use what God had given them. Though, Miss Ruthie must confess that the buggy and automobile rides made her feel like royalty, especially on a day like June 4, 1899 when the magnolias exposed themselves like virgins in waiting on their wedding night. The air was sweet and thick with their wanting, filled with their pleas for attention. Miss Ruthie took in their air, like it was a whiff of freedom, and it seemed like all of the coloreds in town partook in her moment as well. They onlooked with pride as the big strapping driver got out and went around to open the car door for the old woman. Their eyes did not budge once- no, not even when the car was far past the railroad tracks and out of sight, for there was honor in seeing her off- this woman that was almost a doctor, their Miss Ruthie- or as they liked to call her, Mama Mae. Anyone who could help bring life into the world couldn't be too far off from God in their book.

To tell the truth there was no real need for Miss Ruthie to go all that ways to help deliver Madame's fourth child. She was only there for show. The Creoles liked to make a big to do about everything in their lives, and births were no exception. Madame was used to the routine of births by now, and could most likely perform the how thing on her own, for she had given birth to three daughters before Dahlia and lost two others in between. But Miss Ruthie came to her beckon call anyway. You could say it was out of manners more than obligation.

And now here she was, wading her old tired feet through cold waters trying to get to that gal. Somehow the Lord gave her a vigor she thought she would never capture again. He was making sure she got to where He needed her to be in due time, for He was not ready to call that one to him just yet, she had a ways to go. When Miss Ruthie reached her, Dahlia was stretched out on the living room floor- looking like a broken doll. Her body was as cold as a block of ice. The boy was right, she was not breathing. The old woman placed her lips over the half dead woman's, and breathed into her with all of her might several times. She was about to give her up for dead, almost ready to give her-her final blessing as she held her there limply in her arms. But she started coughing and gasping. "Praise be to God!" the old one shouted from her soul "Thank you Jesus!" But all was not over. She coughed, yes- she gasped, yes, but she slunk back into unconsciousness. The only good thing that you could say about her was that she was at least breathing. The boy was still outside rousing up anybody who dared to listen. Tears started to well up in Miss Ruthie's eyes as she thought of the worst. If that gal left, she would leave him in the world all by his lonesome. The world was too hard a place for someone of his kind. She knew that there was indeed a distance between those two, a gap that should have never been, but at least they had each other, even though they failed to realize it. They were one in the same, each in their own way pining for love lost- she for a man that disappeared as quickly and thinly as any ghost, and he for a Mama that barely knew he was alive. Something was unnatural about the whole thing, but Miss Ruthie could not place a finger on it- though she believed that what was hidden would eventually come to light, darkness never prevails. As she turned her thoughts over and over in her mind, she began rocking the girl, and the people started swarming in like bees

to a hive of honey running over. They kept their distance though, many stayed glued to the walls like permanent fixtures, eyes however transfixed to the couple in the center of the room. Snutty Sanders, the town undertaker and his daughter Sarah were the only brave souls to approach the two. He was an old thin man, as black as sin, but as kind and gentle as Jesus himself. He seemed to carry an inner light that was not of this world. His daughter was just as frail as he, but she was a deathly yellow- like her Ma. And even though she was thin, she had full sagging cheeks that hung from the sides of her face like small water-filled balloons. She was what you would call an ordinary looking girl, you didn't have an epiphany when you looked into her face, nor did your heart tug- hers was not a face that you would recall or miss in the midst of daydreaming. But she was one who knew of and accepted her plainness, and did her best to bury it beneath piles of make-up that made her look like a clown. Despite this, there was a quiet calm about her, a patience instilled in her that one might suspect was the result of having lived with so many dead people all of her 23 years. She was the first to break the air with words in that cold little room,

“Mama Mae, she ain't done left us yet has she?” She took Dahlia's limp hand into her own, her big gray eyes seemed to hope for the best, as she awaited an answer.

“No chile, she ain't left us yet- almost, but not quite. She still got will. Where the boy?”

“He went to go fetch the good doctor.” Snutty cut in, his sour breath was warm and strong. Miss Ruthie was taken aback by it, and curled up her lips and nose- though she tried her best to do it as discreetly as possible. She imagined hers must have not

smelled much better, seeing how since the storm's advent, caring for one's teeth was not a priority of anyone. Like others, she had become immune to her own stench.

As they began to discuss the nature of Dahlia's condition, or what they speculated it to be, the air of anxiety in the room began to melt. Reverend Toliver and his wife stepped forward and anointed the sleeping one. The vigor and hope in his voice released a spirit amongst the gathered. A fire warmed their insides and made them forget about the girl being an outsider- a Creole, a recluse. She was just a girl who was caught in between this world and the next, alone it seemed- scared, just like they were. And from there the praying began- the moaning and wailing soon followed and the room was in a frenzy, set on fire, full with something holy and unknown. And if one happened to be a stranger passing through, they could easily mistake the sad yellow house for a church in hiding.

By the time Doctor O'Behr and his wife arrived, several people had fallen out, he didn't know whom it was that needed him most. He looked to his aunt for guidance. The old woman was still in the center of the room, still holding the girl, still rocking.

"Come see what you can do for her. I got her to breathing, thank the Lord, but she still out of it."

The strapping doctor quickly rushed to her side. He felt for a pulse, raised her eyelids, poked here and there on her, then pulled some instruments from his black doctor's bag. Acanthus was by his Ma's side all the long, silently talking her back- for what mother could resist the cry of her only child? A mother's senses are so strong that she can hear the thoughts of a child before they materialize into words, feel a child's pain miles away, foresee danger before it even happens, touch a heart before it even cries out

for soothing- this was his only hope. And be this as it may, he talked to her more than he had ever talked to her in his life, in their silent language. And she must have heard him, for her eyes opened slowly. He was elated, and outstretched his arms, but she must have not seen him. This could be the only explanation. She had to not have seen him, because she reached for the stranger and pulled him close to her. She kissed him madly. And everyone was watching. The little boy's arms felt heavy all of a sudden, and dropped to his sides like two dead weights. Everyone was shocked. The outsider, yet again, had overstepped her bounds, even in the midst of death. The Spirit was gone and the devil set in. Old thoughts and feelings started swirling again. Judgements crept in, old "I told you so's". It was like they were slapped in the face all over again, and the sting of the slap was harsher this time, because they almost accepted her in, almost bit their tongues for having thought ill of her all those years, were almost ready to admit and right their wrongs and go before the face of God and beg Him for forgiveness.

It was like waking up from death, like she had wrestled a thousand demons and then some, and had but one ounce of breath left- all of which she used to carry her back to the land of the living. Someone was calling her back- someone's sweet words were piercing her ears. The only person whom that could be was her dear Elias. He knew how to whisper words into her ears that would send her to melting. He had been that way from the start. She had to come back. There was no question now. The one that took her life, was coming back to give it, and she could not disappoint him. So with the ash of

death still tugging at her heels, and sleep heavy in her eyes, in the dreaminess of it all, she grabbed his face- for his was the first she had seen. She pressed her lips passionately against his. Her one true love had finally returned after all of that time. It was sad to think that it took an act of God and the over flooding of a river to turn back time. But there was something unfamiliar about his lips, something foreign- an emptiness. She withdrew from him, widened her eyes to shake the sleep away, refocused and saw before her a handsome man, yes, but he was not Elias. Her hand quickly drew itself to her lips, as if to gently wipe away the sting of his unfamiliar moustache. She felt ashamed, and even more horrified when she noticed the room full of people who had witnessed her madness.

“ I’m so sorry.” She softly said, her eyes scanned each face for forgiveness, but found none.

A stout woman standing near the man she just kissed, was visibly upset. Her sharp round eyes and prim down-turned mouth left such a sting that it caused tears to fall uncontrollably from Dahlia’s midnight blues. Her eyes finally found their way to Acanthus, as if in an afterthought. She grabbed him close to her, and sobbed on his soft shoulder. His hands still felt like weights, but there was enough love left in him to make them rise and embrace her. He could not stay angry with her for long, something would not let him. He understood now that she was a mad woman more so than ever before- and knew that he must love her madness as much as he loved her, for the two were inseparable.

Chapter 10

Life resumed after the storm, slowly but surely. Many swore that they had seen an apparition of a dove carrying an olive branch, and soon after there were stories swirling around about how some had seen a great rainbow in the sky, and how even still some others had seen Jesus himself. But it wouldn't be Backwaters if there weren't some lies to stir about. The two in 1011 resumed their quiet existence, locked away. It would be that way for a while now, until folks' anger about the kiss subsided. But surprisingly enough, there were visitors to the house- Miss Ruthie, of course, and a few widows who could relate to and understand the sorrow that led to the mad kiss. But there was also a visitor that came to their door, whom Dahlia thought she would never see again.

It was on a day that was calm. The blue of the sky was piercing enough to send you dreaming, and the sheer rays of that lemon colored sun filled you with a warmth that came close to that of a mother's womb. A day like that seemed powerful enough to raise the dead. And it was just that-that brought Madame Fountainbleu across that creek, over the railroad tracks, and to the little house numbered 1011. She was dressed grandly as always, seemingly untouched by the poverty the flood had touched others with. She drove slowly into town in her shiny, burgundy, Ford Model T- as if she were riding in a

parade, but more so as if she was rubbing her wealth into the faces of the wide-eyed onlookers. When she parked the car in front of Dahlia's house, a slew of children were drawn to the car like a magnet. There was a brazenous in the children that was absent in the adults. They were fearless, and didn't care if the rich lady knew it. They were not intimidated by her, and began to converse with her as if she were one of their next door neighbors.

"That sure is a pretty car, lady." One bubble-eyed boy said as he commenced rubbing it.

"Why, thank you darlin." Madame was surprisingly mild mannered around children. There was always something about their in-your-face innocence and bold honesty that melted her- and with some stretch of the imagination, even made her appear almost human.

"Who you comin to see?" A girl in the crowd shouted, she was fascinated by the rich lady's pretty lemon colored dress that seemed to out shine the sun.

"I'm here to see Miss Dahlia."

"You mean the crazy lady?" Someone in the back replied. A host of giggles and snickering soon followed- all of which died down once the children noticed the woman hadn't seen the humor.

"You children go get you some candy from ole Pap." She withdrew a paper dollar from her coin purse, and handed it to the eldest looking child. They drowned her in "thank yous", and sped off in the direction of Pap Mirro's. There was one however that stayed behind, the one who seemed to love the car most. He was still rubbing the same spot he rubbed from the start. "Don't you want any candy, cher?" The boy shook

his head. “Well, I tell you what, since you seem to take a likin to ole Bessy here, how bout I give you a dolla of your own, and you keep an eye on her while I’m doing my visitin.”

The boy agreed that he wouldn’t let any harm come to the car, and truth be told he would have done it for free, but he took the dollar anyway. Times were too hard in Backwaters to refuse free money. He would give it to his Ma. Satisfied, Madame Fountainbleu left the boy and the car, and struggled her way up the steps to 1011. The house carried an air of deadness, seemed unlived in. She knocked several times before she could get a response. Finally Acanthus answered. He was shocked to see his Grandmaman. She pulled him to her before he could say a word.

“Mon cher, how good it is to see your face, yeah. Your Gram come all this ways to see you. How you all sparing?”

“Fine, Ma’am.”

“What I told you bout that ‘Ma’am’ business, cher? Where is your Maman?”

“She out back, tending to the wash.”

“Take me to her.”

Acanthus took her by the hand and led her through the shotgun house. It pierced her heart to see her daughter and grandchild living in such a humble place. It was a neatly kept house, but it was a poor man’s house. She offered to move her and the boy several times to a better place, but Dahlia refused. She was adamant about not going back to Lafitte. Madame even offered to move her into one of the nicer homes in Backwaters, but that was only a pipedream. The only nice houses in Backwaters were in the white folks’ part of town, and they weren’t about to let any colored move amongst

their kind- no matter how almost white she looked, or how rich her family line was. But as one might suspect this didn't stop Madame from trying to convince them otherwise. She even offered to donate some handsome funds if they would bend their rules a bit, but they flat out told her that "nigger money" had no value to them. But she did not let them cut her pride, for she told them about the fine line of Frenchmen her family lines descended from, and how she owned land in this place and that place and could buy them if she had a mind to. But they did not care. In their minds a nigger was a nigger, and they were not going to let any of them move side by side with them- there was no negotiating that. Even Mr. Rosenstein, the owner of the local department store, and who loved him some black women, did not consider negotiating the matter. He felt that he had done enough by agreeing to let Dahlia shop at his store in the wee morning hours before all the white customers came in. It wasn't always that way though, for at first she shopped amongst the white customers undetected. She was able to Pass well, because in the winters her skin lost its color, and with a bonnet tied about her head she could easily be mistaken for a white girl. But her cover was soon busted, when a woman who knew her mother recognized her. Dahlia was flipping through dress patterns, when Mrs. Perkins spotted her.

"Dahlia Fountainebleu, darling, don't tell me that is you." She was an olive colored woman with big fat rosy cheeks. She seemed to bubble over with happiness with seeing the sight of Dahlia. She recognized her by the oak brown ringlets, for when she visited the Fountainebleus she never failed to dote upon the beautiful hair of the little girl Dahlia. Her hair always reminded her of that of a lily white porcelain doll's. How could

she forget such beautiful hair- hair she always wished she had. Even though the girl was grown now, the hair was the same.

“Why little Dahlia, don’t you remember me? I’m Missus Betty Perkins. I used to come visit your Ma way back when. Remember the lady who used to bring over teacakes? Sure you do, sugar. Your daddy used to do all our carpentry work. And a fine craftsman he was. My, it sure is good to see you, all grown.” Dahlia was at a loss for words. The plump woman had a booming voice that made almost every head turn in the store. She made Dahlia twirl around to show off her figure. Dahlia’s eyes seem to plead with her to shut up, but Mrs. Perkins was too wrapped up in the sound of her own voice to notice or even heed the plea. Dahlia was on pins and needles. She did not want the woman to reveal that she was colored, for such a revelation would end her store visits- and oh how she loved Rosenstein’s. It was a magical place for her. A place she had been accepted at, a place that had the most beautiful fabrics, and dresses, and shoes, and toiletries. One slip of the tongue from Mrs. Perkins would end that. Oh how her little heart prayed. Of course she did not want to be a white girl, her mother’s love of whiteness had immuned her to such- so much so that she had come to detest whites and any of her kind that were tainted enough to worship them. That was her main reason for leaving Lafitte, and courting Elias. But her love of material things, especially clothes was what drew her to Rosenstein’s Department store. She loved beautiful things. This was the one trait of her mother’s that she refused to let lose of. Rosenstein’s had beautiful things. Their store window was always decorated like a rich man’s dream. She had to be part of that dream, and there was no reason why she shouldn’t. But the proprietor thought otherwise, for he had written it as plain as day on an intricately carved

piece of rosewood, “No Coloreds Allowed”. The irony of it- there on the most beautiful piece of wood, in the most fanciest of letters, was written the harshest words there could ever be. But Dahlia did not let those words stop her. She was colored and proud of it, but she looked almost white. Yes, almost, and what would be the harm if she walked into that store and those folks didn’t know any better? She couldn’t help that she was a trick of the eye. Truth be told, it was a curse and blessing that seemed to rule in her favor from time to time. After all, it wasn’t like she was lying to them. It wasn’t as if she flat out and told them that she was white, and then again it wasn’t as if she told them she wasn’t either. All she did was walk in there and blended. What was the harm in that?

But there was harm- at least according to those white folks. A colored had walked amongst them, and they didn’t even know it. She had sashayed her way into their part of town, into their sacred store, breathed their white air- touched and bought their sacred things. There was no forgiving in that- no recompense. And how it all was revealed was quite innocent. Mrs. Perkins thought she was paying the proprietor a compliment, had the audacity to even believe she was doing Dahlia some good too. It was all innocent. It had to be—couldn’t it?

“Oh my things have sure come a ways. Slowly but surely. Why I never thought I’d see the day that colored and white shopped side by side. The New South sure is some kinda wonderful. This is the way God intended it to be- brother along side brother, or in this case sister alongside sister, irregardless of color.”

There was a stillness in the air- a dead, piercing stillness in Women’s Patterns. It was so quiet that you could almost hear those folks’ brains churning and cranking. And by God, that was not a comforting sound, especially to Dahlia.

“Why Missus Perkins, whatever do you mean?” The confused store clerk inquired. Her red brows seemed ready for a frown.

“I’m sorry. Please beg my pardon. I was being presumptuous. I thought you knew.” Mrs. Perkins’ words fell clumsily out of her mouth. She looked from the woman to Dahlia, then back again.

“Knew what?”

“That she was colored.”

“Colored?”

With that said, everyone’s eyes shot up and were aimed at Dahlia, who by now was visibly trembling. The once kind-eyed and soft-spoken clerk seemed to transform into the harshest of monsters. Her face was flushed red, and her clenched fists seemed to drive nails through her palms. The volcano erupted.

“YOU BLACK BITCH! I DARE YOU COME INTO OUR ESTABLISHMENT, PARADING AROUND LIKE YOU WERE ONE OF US.” She snatched Dahlia’s hat from her head so she could further examine the face of the almost white nigger. She wanted to see how she could have been so easily fooled. If there was blackness there she wanted to see it now.

“Please,” Mrs. Perkins pleaded as she stepped in between the monster and the girl. “I’m sure this was a misunderstanding. The girl isn’t from these parts, she couldn’t have known.”

“THERE IS A SIGN OUT THERE AS CLEAR AS DAY!”

“A sign? A sign? What is a sign to someone who can’t read?”

Dahlia had to clench her teeth, and swallow a big wad of spit to keep her mouth closed. She could read. Most likely she could out read any one of them in that store, for she had mastered reading at the very tender age of four. Her teachers had in fact called her gifted, well learned beyond her years. Worst of all Mrs. Perkins knew this, and there she was standing in the midst of all those white faces making Dahlia look like an idiot. She was making a bad situation worse. But Dahlia knew too that her lie was the only thing that was going to save her- it was the only thing that was going to insure that she would walk out of those doors with her life still in tact. So she stayed quiet, and swallowed as much spit as it would take to keep her pride down.

They let her leave with her life, and told her she could never come back- no, not even through the backdoor. But time and the lust of a man told better. She came back, yes, and it wasn't through any backdoor. Mr. Rosenstein had a weakness for black women. It didn't matter if they were as ebony as onyx, as bright as the sun, or a shade or two in between. Be this as it may, he fell for Dahlia. She could talk him out of his breath if she had a mind to, but she didn't. All she wanted was beautiful things again, and she wanted to pick them out herself. And suffice it to say, going through a backdoor to get these things was not an option. No, she had to go through the front door, just like all of the white customers. She would accept nothing less. He gave her what she wanted, what man could resist those heavy midnight blues- that soft yellow skin that glowed like a lantern, those salmon pursed lips, and a voice as soft as cotton? She could send any man to melting, and he was no exception. They made a compromise. He agreed to let her come back to the store, even agreed to let her be so bold as to come through the front door, but she had to come in the wee hours of the morning, before the sun had a mind to

fully rise- and of course before the white patrons came to do their shopping. She settled for the arrangement, but did not give him anything in return. No, not even her body- she had too much pride for that, was raised too well. But she would keep him hoping. For there was no harm in stringing him along- that is how women play, and that is the challenge that men love most. So many times he gave her things for free, gave her extra money for the boy- made sure she was not left wanting for anything. And all the while, he was counting, and waiting- counting and giving, counting and wanting- and eventually she would cave in, or would she? He didn't want to guess that answer, for it would take the fun out of the game. And he loved the game too much to give it up, besides he had a slew of others who had given in and would continue to give in easily.

By the time Madame and the boy reached the back of the house, Dahlia was in the middle of hanging clothes on the drying post. She seemed too consumed in her task to even notice the two.

“Ma, we got company.”

“Company, who?” She did not bother to turn around.

“Long time no see, chere.” Madame volunteered. Dahlia stopped in her tracks, and turned around. She was not happy to see the woman standing there, holding her boy's hand. She told her years back that she was not welcomed there. But Madame thought time could heal all things.

“Canthus, what did we discuss about this here woman? Haven't I told you not to open that door to her?” Dahlia angrily snapped a shirt in the air. Acanthus was embarrassed.

“Yes, Ma'am.”

“Then why did you defy me?” She did not look at him as she resumed her task. He remained silent, beating himself up inside for having hurt her. This would be yet another strike against him.

“Go on. Leave us. You and a switch have some talking to do later.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He let loose of his Grandmaman’s hand and retreated back into the house.

“Still angry, chere? Don’t you know bitterness shortens your life, yeah? When you ever gonna let loose of the past?”

“You and I have nothing to discuss. I thought I made that clear the last time you stepped foot on this side.” Dahlia commenced pouring out the barrel of dirty water. Anger gave her a zest of energy that made the barrel seem like the weight of a mere feather.

“I did what I did out of love for you, and if that is a crime, then lock me up.”

“There’s more to the story than you ever admitted to. I know. A man ain’t gonna up and leave just over some words...He ain’t gonna a leave the only woman he claimed to love and their baby over some words. There ain’t a word that powerful, woman.”

The girl’s words left a sting- resurrected old guilt that she thought had long since been buried. Suddenly she felt hot. She opened her purse and pulled out a white handkerchief. It felt good against her face. She felt her rice powder melting in that heat. Finally she spoke, ”I don’t know what you are getting at, chere. I didn’t come here to argue. I came here to discuss the boy.”

“The boy? He has a name.” She looked her mother boldly in the face, searching for the mystery. Dissatisfied with no answer, she resumed filling the barrel with fresh

water and lye, “How is it all of a sudden you just started thinking about him? Sound mighty fishy to me.”

“You’ve picked up a smart tongue living around these people. Full of sass. Why, in my day a child wouldn’t dare talk to their parents that way.”

“Why are you here? Haven’t you done enough already with ruining my life? You come back for seconds?”

“I want to take the boy. I want him to get some proper schooling. He needs some culture in his life. He needs to be around his kind.”

“His name is Acanthus, and he gets plenty schooling.”

“What schooling, chere? Soon planting time come they close that school and send them children out in the fields. He can’t be getting but three months of schooling at best each year, if that much.”

“And whose fault is that? Whose fault is it that these people have to stop their lives to go across that creek and pick and plant- busting their guts? Whose fault?”

“I didn’t make the world the way it is, I’m just living in it. And from what I can recall, you lived in my same world without a care the first 17 years of your life. If it was so bad a place why didn’t you leave it sooner?” Madame regretted those words after they had fallen out. They did not come out right, but she could not take them back. Tears welled up in the girl’s eyes, but she kept her head turned to hide them from the wicked woman on the porch.

“Get out of my yard. Get out and don’t ever come back. I mean it! Me and my ‘boy’ can manage fine without you.” Her voice was heavy with the shadows of tears, but firm enough to convey that she meant business.

“Fine. I will leave, but I will be back. This is too important to take lightly. You have his future in your hands, and I ‘m not going to let you mess his up.” With that she retreated back through the house. Kissed the boy goodbye, and drove off in her shiny car, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

Chapter 11

She caved in, though it took some time and plenty visits from her Maman. She still had not forgiven her, but forgiveness was not the issue, the boy was. He needed an education, for he would need all the education he could muster, and then some, to live in the world he would soon come to face once childhood let loose of him. It would not be an easy place, especially not in the South. She made it clear however to her Maman that her gesture was not the beginnings of a peace offering, and made it even clearer that the boy would not be moving over to Lafitte. He would have to commute every day. With that understood, Madame had no choice but to bend and accept. Though, deep within she hoped her girl would finally let loose of the past, hoping against hope that she would love her again. But she did not let it bother her much. Time would take care of that- God sparing.

The boy did not want to go. He did not want to leave his dear mother's side. She would crumble without him. But even still he obeyed her. The night before his first day of schooling, he tossed and turned. Nightmares bit at every inkling of a dream. He was afraid. There wasn't any reason he shouldn't have been. His Maman made it seem like

Lafitte was the devil's den. No, she did not talk about it much, but her reluctance of speaking about it made it all the more dark and mysterious- especially since she bade him to never step foot on its grounds. And now she was forcing him to go there. He sat on the front porch, in the early morning hours while his Ma was busy preparing breakfast. He was dressed adorably in a crisp white shirt, red bow tie, and gray knickerbockers. His Ma lightly oiled his hair and slicked it down, but soon the morning dew and the natural coil in his hair, caused his ginger curls to resurface. Charletta Mae was at his side, keeping him company. She was allowing herself to become intoxicated by the olive oil in his hair. She was taking the scent all in, for she needed something to remember him by. He would only be gone seven hours at the most, but that was long enough for her to forget him, so she clung to something that would refresh her memory of him throughout the day. And this thing just happened to be the soft scent of olive, rising from a slew of soft ginger curls.

“You gonna be fine. Bet you'll be the smartest one there. At least you won't have to get in no fights with the likes of Joe Smart and Ephron.”

She was trying to comfort him, for she knew of his sadness and him not really wanting to go. He remained silent- held within himself. He watched east, for that would be the direction his Maman would be coming from. He watched horridly, awaiting the shiny burgundy automobile. His feet dangled in unison from the tall kitchen chair. They made a clank-clank sound as they hit against the metal. The sound was wearing thin on the little girl's nerves, but she endured it. It was something that she must endure, for that was a thing of love- to take those things you did not want for the sake of the other. That was what those folks on the silver screen always did. The women took in all the sadness

that the men dished out, and they cried beautiful tears as evidence of their undying affection. In the end the men would recognize the error of their ways and stop making their women sad. This would make the women happy, and then they would cry tears of joy. Their beautiful faces would be soaked in happiness. Charletta Mae longed for such happiness, and believed that Acanthus would be the one to give it to her. So there she sat with him, eyes heavy with something too thick for a boy of nine to discern. He did not like how she was acting lately. She looked at him funny, and talked funny. He would soon need to find a new playmate.

“She can’t be much longer now. Sarpy done already come through and made his rounds. He wake up fore even God. Your Grandma should be coming soon, they both live on the same side. I bet Sarpy woke her up with his truck. Can’t nobody sleep with that loud thing around....You gonna be alright. I’ll be waiting for you when you come back. I probably get out of school fore you.”

He remained silent. He was not in the mood for talking. It was too early in the morning for anything except sleep. The smell of hot sausage tickled his nose, and made his stomach growl. His Ma came to check on him and the girl. She stood in the doorway, with a hair net atop her head. Charletta Mae thought she looked divine- just like a movie starlet, who couldn’t be marred even by sleep.

“You children can come on back and eat. I’ll stand here and watch for her.”

Both children retreated into the house, consumed by the smell of sausage, eggs, and pone bread. It was not long after when Madame arrived. Her entrance was grand as always, and she didn’t fail to carry along with her an air of haughtiness. Dahlia did not bid her a good morning, she merely called for her son to announce the woman’s arrival.

He came reluctantly, knees knocking along the way. His Ma straightened his sweater, and tucked his shirt into place. She inspected his face for error, and finding a tad bit of sleep in the corner of his right eye, licked her finger and wiped it away. Acanthus was filled with warmth. She seemed to care for him in that moment- made him feel like he was the only thing on earth that was worthy of her attention. This made him feel like the whole thing was worth the trouble, anything that made her love him had to be.

“Now you mind your manners, and you listen to your teacher- you hear?”

The boy nodded instantaneously, as if anything she said was law. Her midnight blues hypnotized him into falling prey to whatever she commanded.

“He will do fine. He is a Fountainbleu.” Madame assured from a short distance away. She was standing at her car with the back door opened for the boy.

Dahlia pulled the boy to her, and kissed his cheek. Charletta Mae onlooked as if wishing she were in Miss Dahlia’s place. She however felt the old woman’s eyes watching her suspiciously. It made her feel uncomfortable- so much so that she longed for the boy to go on about his business, so the old woman’s eyes would leave her.

Finally the boy and the old woman left. And for the longest of time Dahlia and the little girl looked upon their disappearance, as the dust from their leaving gently settled back into place.

Saint Augustine’s Catholic School For Boys And Girls was monstrous. To Acanthus, it looked to be a big beige monster ready to devour him whole. He held his Grandmaman’s hand tightly as they advanced towards the red wide double doors. The

playground of the schoolyard was far grander than the dirt yard at his schoolhouse in Backwaters. The only dirt at St. Augustine's was in the sandbox, and even it wasn't ordinary dirt. Everywhere else there lay a bed of plush green grass that was greener than any green he ever laid eyes on. It seemed softer than a bed of feathers, and too delicate to stare at for hours at a time. The yard was also decorated with swings galore, and a row of neatly aligned seesaws. In the middle of it all there was a merry-go-round. Acanthus imagined that it must have been the most fun to play on, judging from the vibrant patchwork quilt colors that adorned it, and seeing that it was in the heart of the playground. Acanthus thought to himself that the school couldn't have been too bad of a place. Any place that held a rainbow of colors at bay couldn't be so bad. The colors eased his mind, so much so that he loosened his grip on his Grandmaman's hands as they walked through the mouth of the double doors.

When they reached the classroom, Acanthus heard the teacher and children reciting something in unison. He didn't know what they were saying, but imagined it must have been something serious and sacred because everyone was facing the crucifix nailed just above the blackboard. They all looked mechanical to him, stiffer than soldiers. Even their colors seemed to blend and spill over into one another's- washed out beiges, sick yellows, and a few near whites here and there. The teacher wore a big black dress with bell like sleeves. A strange black and white hat hid her hair, and there about her waist was a wooden string of beads with a large cross attached to the end. After they finished their speech, the children sat down quietly at their desks. The teacher turned to him and his Grandmaman, and flashed what seemed to be a toothless pretend smile. She

wore thick glasses that covered the better half of her face. She looked ghostly against the blackboard.

“Bon Matin, Madame Fountainbleu. And is this our new pupil?”

“Why yes Sister Clare, this is my Acanthus.”

“Such a fine boy.” She turned and faced her students, “Class, let’s everyone welcome our new student, Acanthus.”

“Bon Matin, Acanthus.” The children cried in unison. A mechanical smile graced each of their faces. Acanthus just smiled back in response.

“Well, we’re going to take good care of him, you rest assured.”

With that said, his Grandmaman released his hand and left him to the care of the nun, but not before hugging him dearly and planting a sloppy kiss upon his jaw.

Surprisingly there weren’t any snickers. Perhaps they would tease him later about it. In Backwaters, they would tease you up front without any shame, and that teasing would be something not easily let go of. Sometimes it followed you for years. Acanthus could attest to that, for he had been teased for the longest for being a he-she, and to add to that for his mother’s madness. Most of his fights at school had stemmed from either of the two. He lost most of those fights, save for the times when Charletta Mae jumped in-in his defense, an action of which was cause for more teasing.

Once Acanthus settled in his desk, he listened intently to the funny dressed woman. Every now and then he would glance at the other children, in search of a friendly face. A girl to the right of him, with darling pigtails hung on both sides of her head, smiled at him. She was missing two front teeth, but seemed to emit rays of sunshine from her smile. Freckles covered her cheeks, but did not take away from her

beauty. Acanthus smiled back at her. She put him at ease. On the playground she held his hand and dragged him from group to group, introducing him to everyone. She told him about the history of the school- how it took a good ten years before it was completed, how the whites from a neighboring town tried to prevent it from opening- how a burning cross nearly burned the whole place down. She swung him over to the candy stand, where happy-faced nuns negotiated the prices of candy, soda pops, huck-a-bucks, and the like with wide-eyed, antsy-legged children. She bought him a praline and an orange pop. Her name was Therese. Acanthus imagined that she must have been the most popular girl, because she knew so many people, and was the loveliest sight there. Her acceptance of him made him nervous. He had never been accepted before. He was so nervous that he only spoke to her when she asked him a question. But she was so consumed with the sound of her own voice that she hadn't noticed his quiet nature. She talked enough for the both of them. For a while they sat on the school steps and watched the other children play. Boys looked at him with envy, and girls looked with want hanging heavy in their eyes. A few boys gathered around him and Therese. They spoke to Acanthus kindly, but with sly eyes. They silently agreed to accept him since Therese had.

A short distance away, a ruckus was stirring. There in the plush green grass was a blonde haired girl spinning. She had a grotesque twisted face that dripped with slobber. Every spin puffed her dress out like a church bell, billowing back and forth. She didn't have any under garments on. The boys killed over with laughter, and the girls hid their faces in shame, while filling each other's ears with quiet talk. The girl was a special student, who somehow got out of her play area that was housed in the back of the school. She spun with a freedom that left an ache in Acanthus' heart. He thought of his Maman,

who at times ran out onto the middle of Main Street chasing after a vision of his father that only she could see. He longed to go out and grab the girl to shield her with himself- to make her shame his. She did not deserve the laughter and the jeers, for she was a weak thing just like his mother. Yet she continued to spin like she had all the zest and energy the world could offer. Acanthus prayed silently for her, or rather wished- for rescuing her seemed too difficult a task for even God to accomplish. Finally, a nun caught wind of what was going on and quickly ran out to get the girl. She popped her harshly several times on her buttocks, and rushed her out of sight. The boys continued to laugh, and the girls continued to buzz with talk. Therese however joined in the laughter with the boys. The sound of her laughter pierced Acanthus' heart. It rang out loud and hollow. Suddenly he was afraid of her and felt betrayed. After her laughter died down, she took hold of his hand and led him to the merry-go-round, where they spun violently. She threw her head backward into the wind, and laughed her hollow laugh. She was still high from laughter spent on the blond-haired girl. Acanthus was sickened. He had to fight to hold his insides down. Later, when they were back in class, Therese's smile lost its luster. It no longer radiated warmth, but rather coldness. He longed for home. It seemed a lifetime before he could reach it. By the time he arrived at his steps he was too tired to tell his Maman about his day. She sensed that all did not go well, his eyes told all. She did not press him though. There would be plenty of time for that. Instead, she helped him ease out of his shoes, and removed his sweater and outer shirt. She nestled him into his bed. And for a moment she lingered there-seemed held there by something stronger than she or the boy. She rubbed his head gently, an action that lulled him into a deep sleep. He dreaded the next day's coming.

Day two lacked the luster that began day one. Therese still greeted him with her candid smile. Out of obligation he returned the gesture, trying at best to make pretend that it was sincere. She didn't detect a difference. To begin the day everyone recited the Pledge of Allegiance, and thereafter prayed an Our Father, 3 Hail Marys, and a Glory Be. Acanthus knew the Our Father but not the others. His Maman made him recite an Our Father each night before he closed his eyes. After praying, the children were instructed on grammar, and were told to pair up for a class exercise. Naturally, Therese volunteered Acanthus for her partner. Together they had to scour page nine of the morning paper for helping verbs. She was quick at the task and found four at first glance. Acanthus followed her lead and soon caught on. She encouraged him like any good coach.

"You are a very smart boy, Acanthus."

"Not so smart, but I'm a fast learner."

"That I can see."

"You got a girl?"

"A girl?" Acanthus asked with a puzzled stare. She nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah, a girl."

Acanthus shook his head.

"Well, I'm gonna be your girl, okay?"

Acanthus was hesitant. He did not fully comprehend what she meant. She looked at him the same funny way Charletta Mae had as of late. But somehow something made him nod his head. He did not want to cross Therese. Her sting seemed as venomous as that of a Black Widow's.

Happy with his response, Therese started drawing hearts around all of the helping verbs.

“We’ll have our wedding on the playground.”

By then, Acanthus was lost in the words on the page. Their bold blackness seemed to run into and topple over each other. He was dizzy. Again he longed for home.

Out on the playground, everyone was awaiting the wedding, even the nuns. A group of girls took the merry little bride off to a hidden place. They helped her make a bridal crown made out of Swamp Buttercups. The boys took Acanthus aside, and rustled him up with boyish play- something he was not akin to, but took a liking to very quickly. They wrestled, and competed with each other to see who could spit the farthest. They even played a game of craps when the nuns weren’t looking. Someone had decided to give Acanthus the nickname of Pea, since he was the shortest in the bunch. This almost made him feel at ease again, but then the wedding started. The slew of girls escorted the bride back onto the playground. The yellow crown fought to be freed from her head, but she kept it at bay. To Acanthus it looked like a fallen halo. She was led towards him. His heart leaped. She grabbed his hand and the ceremony began. A big stout boy, an upper classman he imagined, was the acting priest. He said a few quick words and the ceremony was over before it even began. And before he could stop her, Therese planted a soft kiss upon his lips. Her lips felt like rose petals, and her breath was heavy with the aroma of pink bubble gum and dinner mints. The kiss seemed to last for an eternity. When it was finished everyone clapped, cheered, and whistled. Therese smiled gallantly at the adoring crowd, and threw her bridal crown amidst giddy-faced girls. Each fought to possess it, and was disappointed to find that it had fallen into the hands of Marietta

Fontenot- the ugliest and most unpopular girl at the school. She had held that title the whole duration of her study there, and that had been since kindergarten.

Acanthus was filled with nervousness, a nervousness that had come to surface in the form of urine shooting down the front of his pants. He could not stop it. At first no one noticed. But then a boy who had befriended him just moments earlier, pointed out the occurrence. He laughed uncontrollably, and soon the others joined in. Suddenly the man of the hour was now the butt of everyone's jokes. There was not a forgiving face amongst the crowd. Therese turned cherry red with shame and ran out of view. A girl went and told the nuns at the candy stand about what had happened. Acanthus stood there frozen and as stiff as a board. It was warm outside, but suddenly he felt cold. A nun rushed out to get him. Her face was full of anger as she escorted him to the nurse's station for clean up.

"For Christ's sake, boy. You are well old enough to know when you need to go."

Acanthus remained silent. A kind nurse helped him out of his wet clothes. She was dressed in white, and kindness seemed to emit from her. She was much different from the nuns. Her skin was a glowing maple brown, and she smelled of flowers and medicine. He wished he could stay there with her the rest of the day. Her office was so sterile but inviting.

"Don't you worry none, sweet thing. It happens to the best of us. I imagined any man would have the jitters on his wedding day." She gathered his generous cheeks between her fingers, and kissed him on his forehead. "There, there. You're all dried up now - as fresh as a day. You run along to class now before you miss your Music lesson. I hear Sis Anne got some new cymbals."

Acanthus reluctantly obeyed the nice lady. When he reached class, everyone stared at him. There was a dead silence. Sister Anne encouraged him to quickly pick an instrument from the brown box and scurry to his seat. He pulled out the first thing he could lay his hands on. It was a triangle, a girl's instrument- as the boys had dubbed it. There was a snicker here and there- quiet snickers too soft for the old sister to detect, but loud enough for Acanthus' sensitivity to hear. Acanthus hurried to his seat. He tried to look Therese in the eye, but she ignored him. Day two seemed even longer than day one. Before he left for the day, he was instructed to go back to the nurse's station. Once there, Nurse Camellia handed him his clothes secured in a large, neatly rolled paper bag. She whispered into his ear,

“They're all washed and dried. No need to tell your Ma otherwise.” Then she winked at him, “Just tell her you got dirty on the playground.”

Acanthus' heart doubled. He nodded. The woman was killing him with kindness and he didn't know why. It was later that he learned that she in fact was one of his aunts. She clung to the boy even before she knew he was kin, for she knew what it felt like to be an outcast. She was the darkest of her sisters, and felt the most unloved by their mother, though their mother never admitted it even to this day. Much of her life was spent mothering those that were in need of a kind smile and warm intentions. This was one of the reasons why she became a nurse, and clung to those things and people that needed her more than life itself.

She volunteered to sit and wait for Acanthus' ride with him. His Grandmaman was running late. Finally she rode up into the circular driveway at the back of the school. Nurse Camellia was surprised to see the familiar car.

“Is that your Grandmaman?”

Acanthus quickly nodded.

“Why that is my Maman. I wonder why she kept you such a secret. She should have told me about you. That woman, I swear.” She shook her head in disgust and marched her way over to the old woman and the car. They had a few tense words, all of which came out like mumble to the boy. Soon after Camellia came back to him, gently took his hand and escorted him to his Grandmaman. She seemed flustered and left before he could even tell her goodbye and thank you. The ride home was long and dry. And once home, the boy did the same as the day before. He headed for his bed, and let himself drift into a deep sleep. Dahlia was worried about him. She put Elias aside long enough to worry about her boy. That was something new, but the saddest thing about it was that the boy was too consumed in his own sorrow to even notice her worry. It always seemed they were missing each other at the most inappropriate times.

Day three was no better than day two for Acanthus, for the same embarrassment happened in the midst of French lessons. A puddle of yellow soon surrounded his desk, and since there was a slight slope in the floor, the liquid rolled to the desks behind him. A girl screamed and everyone stared. She quickly gathered her feet into her chair. A boy whispered “Pea-Pee strikes again.” And everyone laughed. Sister Claire angrily marched towards his desk, yanked him by the collar and scolded him. Therese laughed that hollow laugh that was akin to her. The nun quickly slapped the wooden ruler against her desk with a force so strong that it almost cracked the stick. The girl quickly sucked in her laughter. Acanthus fought tears. They stung his inner eyes so cruelly. He did not know why this was happening. He had never been a bed wetter, and could hold his urine well.

Sister Claire appointed a class monitor, and escorted the boy to the nurse's station- never letting loose of his collar.

"You stupid little boy. You're too overgrown for such. I'm gonna have a long talk with your Grandmaman this evening. This is uncalled for. Two days in a row."

She left him at the nurse's station, not even bothering to wait and explain the boy's case. There was nothing of God in her, Acanthus thought. If it had been true, as his Maman had always warned, that people who told lies were always struck down by lightning, surely God would have something worse in store for people like Sister Claire and her crew.

When Nurse Camellia returned from lunch, she found Acanthus leaning against the wall with his head slumped downward. She knew it had happened again.

"You poor darling." She lifted his head, "Come, let's get you out of those wet things."

And she helped him. Each touch was as careful and cautious as that of a mother's. She hand washed his garments, just as she did the day before, and took them to one of the rectory's maids to iron dry. He pleaded to stay with her the rest of the day, but with reluctance she sent him back. No one looked at him, no one talked to him, and his marriage to Therese was annulled- this he learned through eavesdropping on a group of girls in the lunchroom. He longed for death now, for not even home could comfort him. Silently he prayed and wished for death. Words had power. This was something his mind convinced him of. People had thrown words at him and his Maman all of their lives. If their words held power, then why shouldn't his?

After school, Sister Claire forbade Nurse Camellia to wait with Acanthus. Instead she waited with him, silently. She appeared to be praying, because every now and then she would move her fingers to a new bead on the wooden rope tied about her waist. Finally Madame drove up, casually late as always. Sister Claire immediately dropped her rope of beads and stormed to the car. She led Madame inside, and they talked for what seemed a lifetime to the boy. Once done, Madame came back out and looked at the boy with disdain. She lectured him the whole ride home about how important it was to maintain a good image. He was bringing shame to the family name with his recent actions, and it must stop at once. The boy could do nothing but nod, and every now and then throw out a “Yes, Ma’am.” Once they arrived in Backwaters, Acanthus rushed inside. Madame did not bother to tell Dahlia anything because she did not want to hear the girl’s “I told you sos”. And Dahlia, stubborn as she was, wasn’t about to ask the old woman anything- if anything, she would pry the boy. But by the time she could get to him, he had already removed his clothes and tucked himself into bed. Charletta Mae was worried, and each evening she went over to check on the boy.

“How he fairing, Miss Dahlia? I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“He ain’t good. He won’t tell me what’s going on. I knew it was a mistake to let him go over there. That place ain’t nothing but a bed of pain.”

She talked with the little girl with an unknown ease. It was like talking to a dear old friend that loved her regardless if she had all the money in the world or none at all. The little girl felt the same about her. It was a blessing that someone so glamorous even looked her ways. Now since the boy started school across the way, they sat on the porch each evening consumed in each other’s voice.

The deep orange of the sinking sun would melt across their faces as mosquitoes fought for their blood. They would talk about everything while evening seemed to sneakily slip over them like soft bed covers. Charletta Mae wouldn't leave Dahlia's side until forced to by her Auntie Ruthie. That was always around suppertime.

Day four for the boy seemed even more horrid than the days which proceeded it. When Acanthus walked into the classroom, he noticed that newspaper had been put beneath his chair. He walked shame-faced to his seat. Everyone stared, except for Therese. As far as she was concerned, he was as invisible to her as any ghost. Acanthus held his nervousness the greater part of the day, even in the midst of the playground jeers. Everyone now called him Pea-Pee, and the boys made urine noises with their lips. The girls pointed and gossiped. The only one to befriend him was Marietta Fontenot. And for this he was teased all the more. They made up chants about the two being married and having ugly pee-pee babies. They were relentless.

Acanthus was proud that he held his nervousness, despite all of the teasing. Marietta and Nurse Camellia helped ease his worry. At lunch, he and Marietta made a pact.

"You just give me a sign when you feel that tinkling coming, and I'll go with you up to Sister's desk so you can get permission to go to the toilet."

Acanthus agreed that it was a good solution. And as circumstance would have it, the time came when he had to take her up on her offer. It was in the midst of a Math quiz. He let out a soft "psst" to get her attention, but hers as well as a few other's heads rose. She immediately got up and both walked to Sister's desk hand in hand. Everyone stopped their thinking and writing and just stared.

“What are you two doing up?” Sister Claire boomed in a hard voice, “Everyone, eyes back on your papers, and you two get back to your desks- this is a timed quiz.”

“But Sister,” Marietta exclaimed, “He has to go.”

Sister Claire examined the boy’s face for confirmation. He nodded. She was unyielding, “Hold it till the quiz is over. It won’t be much longer.”

With that said, the two had no choice but to return to their desks. Acanthus picked up his pencil and tried to concentrate on the numbers, but then he started thinking about how the minutes and seconds were rolling by so slowly. The tick-tick of the clock was banging in his head. Numbers began swirling everywhere. He could not hold the eruption any longer. It happened yet again. Laughter spilled everywhere, except from Marietta’s mouth and Sister Claire’s. That was it. This had to be stopped. Sister marched towards him and yanked him from his chair. She forced him to the front of the class, pulled him over her knees, and beat him violently on his buttocks with the thick wooden ruler. Everyone was quiet, and even felt sorry for him. Marietta ran out of the class to go get Nurse Camellia, for she seemed to be the kindest soul in the whole school. When Nurse Camellia arrived, she had to nearly tear the possessed nun from the boy. By then he had fainted from shame, and his dear Aunt had to throw him over her shoulder and carry him out like an infant. He was little, but felt like dead weight. Marietta followed her back to the nurse’s station. Everyone now on-looked with concern. They felt sorry for him. Sister Claire was a monster. It was as if they had never known such to be true. They were petrified, and wished they had enough courage to follow in Marietta’s footsteps. But they did not, so they stayed glued to their seats, afraid that the littlest of movements would stir the woman dressed like a penguin into another frenzy. They had

newfound respect for Marietta, and wished to tell her so. Many kept their eyes on the door, awaiting her return.

But meanwhile, at the nurse's station, Nurse Camellia was panicking. She could not stir the boy. He slipped into something too deep. Marietta's face was flooded with tears as she tried dictating the details of the whole incident to the nurse. Camellia only heard bits and pieces. Her mind was too worried to take in the whole thing in one big chunk. After she washed the soiled garments, she had Marietta run them over to the rectory for drying, for her nerves were too bad to do it herself. The boy was still out of it. She took and laid his limp body in a small room no bigger than two closets. She rested him gently on the cot, and lit a kerosene lamp to blot out the thick darkness. The door was left ajar so she could hear when he arose. She waited, and waited, but he never stirred. Inside his mind he was calling for his Maman. And she must have heard him, because in the midst of her noonday wash, she paused and looked up. Something was not right, but she couldn't place a finger on it. Something was pulling her towards Lafitte, but she was reluctant to go, for she had long since shook the dust of that place off of her feet and vowed never to return. But that nagging something would not let her rest. She had to stop her wash, and affix herself on her front porch. Her eyes kept looking east- thoughts kept tumbling, fear kept rising- time kept ticking, but not fast enough. And then she rose. She had to break her vow. She had to go back to that place where she had gotten her beginnings- reluctant though she was- something was pulling her towards it, and that something would not let her rest until she obeyed.

She left her place on the porch, with the grime of her labor still heavy on her hands and work garments. Appearance meant nothing now. Something was calling her

and she had to go. She followed that force. She was almost there. Her feet were just about to cross over the tracks, where Lafitte's corporal limits began, but a car stopped her in her tracks. The moon shaped face in the back was familiar, a face she remembered from childhood. The car suddenly stopped, and the woman in the back flagged Dahlia.

“Sis, Sis, I got your boy!”

At the time Dahlia could not discern the words, but she came to the woman. She was scarce for words, but tears flowed like a river from her eyes, and the excitement of the moment caused the moon faced woman to cry also. Dahlia caught sight of her boy strung out in the back seat. Her heart fell past her feet. She tore the car door open and pushed Camellia out of the way. At that moment she had the strength of ten men, an ox, and a mule. She gathered the boy into her arms. What felt like dead weight in the arms of others felt like a feather in hers. Her boy was almost gone, almost empty. She had to bring him back, and she didn't care what it took. She didn't care about the details that led to his state, at least for the moment. All what mattered was bringing him back. She had to bring him back.

Chapter

12

She brought him back- well almost. She did the next best thing by bringing him to the good doctor's doorstep. She didn't care about the rumors of the kiss anymore. Her little boy was slipping away. He was her only link left to Elias. If he should die then so would she. It took some time before someone came to the door. This was surprising considering all of the wailing and shouting Dahlia was doing. Folks were shocked by the power of her church girl lungs. The door was finally opened by a little girl, who appeared very confused by the noise.

"Is your Daddy in?" Dahlia pleaded.

"Yes, Ma'am." The child quickly replied, and not sooner than that she sped off to get him.

By the time he came to the door, Camellia had made her way to the yard. She was able to explain to Doctor O'Behr the boy's condition from a nurse's point of view.

"Bring him in."

The two women followed the handsome doctor into the house. As instructed, Dahlia laid Acanthus across a couch in the parlor. The doctor's wife, Adell, came and

stood at the parlor door. Her hair was tied back in a tight bun as usual, and she wiped her wet hands roughly upon the apron tied about her waist. She on-looked with suspicion.

Doctor O'Behr examined the boy's eyes and ears, and felt for a pulse. The good thing was that he was still breathing. Doctor O'Behr wanted to keep him over night though for observation. He had some speculation about the cause of the boy's current state, but wanted to do some more reading and make a few contacts for confirmation. Whatever it was, it had to be linked some way to the boy's mother, maybe even further back in the genealogy.

"You just leave him here for the night, Ma'am. I'm going to do some looking into the matter. His breathing and vital signs are all looking good"

"What is it?" Dahlia pleaded. Her eyes were wild, and her voice was growing scratchy. "It's not serious is it? What can I do?"

"I don't want to say what it is until I know for sure. Just bear with me. I'm going to make a few contacts and let you know something definite by morning if not sooner. Please, trust me."

Dahlia finally agreed to leave everything in the doctor's hands, but she insisted on staying with her boy. She would sleep on the floor if need be. As one might imagine this did not set well with the Missus. Dahlia heard their hushed talk behind closed doors. She couldn't discern all of the woman's words, but her tone told all. She didn't want her there. This didn't bother Dahlia though, for she had lived with being unwanted her whole length of stay in Backwaters, which to date was all of nine years. No one there took too kindly to outsiders, especially if those outsiders came from a place like Lafitte. No matter how many years would pass, she and her boy would still be outsiders.

Dahlia couldn't understand why the doctor's wife wasn't more sympathetic to her case, considering that she too was an outsider. Adell wasn't anymore welcomed into the community than she was. Folks caught whiff of who she was even before she settled into town a good five minutes. She carried an air of haughtiness, held her head just a tad bit too high, and looked too hardly at their ragged lives. During the flood months she kept a considerable distance from everyone. While the doctor was off tending to dehydrated and Malaria stricken cases, bruises, and malnourished children, she was cooped up and closed off- disgusted that she had been dragged away from her comfortable life out West to the very pits of Hell. After the flood her closed off nature worsened. Her only conversations were with the town preacher, his wife, and Mrs. Larsen the schoolteacher. She kept the inside and outside of her house immaculate- even adorned the landscape with rose bushes and a flower garden. Her porch was screened in, not opened framed like everyone else's in The Downs. And on the porch was a swing. Even her steps were painted a solemn evergreen to match the house's trim. But what made folks mad the most was the fact that she had the mailbox uprooted and replaced with one to her liking. This was something that you did not do. Everyone was supposed to have the same mailbox. Even the white folks on the other side of town didn't dare mess with their mailboxes. No one was supposed to change anything that had already been set. This was a sin and cause for punishment. Even if a box had become rusted, you didn't mess with it. If it was bent you didn't mess with it either. If the postman saw that it needed a fixing up, he took care of it. The mailbox wasn't your property, it was Uncle Sam's. But the Missus didn't hold such sentiment. That orange rusted monstrosity was clashing with her roses and it needed to be attended to. She had a hard time finding someone who would

do the job though. Even the yardmen, who had followed through with her every request with regards to the landscape, would not touch the thing.

“No, Ma’am- uh-uh. That there ain’t none of my property to touch. That be for the gov’ment an I ain’t messin wit nothin that gone get me put behind bars. Got me a family that need me more.”

“Well, all I need done is for you to yank it from the ground. You won’t be destroying it. I’m sure the folks at the metal yard would be glad to have some scrap.”

She was convinced that her word was truth, and didn’t understand the lunacy of those folks. Uprooting a mailbox seemed innocent enough. It wasn’t as if she didn’t have any intentions of replacing it. In fact, she was replacing it with something even better. But no one in town saw it from her point of view. No matter how rosy she put it, she couldn’t twist it fond enough to change anyone’s mind. No, not even her husband, who felt embarrassed by her actions as of late. But finally she found someone. He was another outsider, someone disconnected from the community. She found him at the town depot. She had gone there to post a sign, detailing the work she needed done. Her hope was that some out-of-towner would be courageous enough to do what those crazy folks there would not.

He was a beggar, and in fact had railroaded his way half across the country for free without anyone knowing the better. It was by chance that he and Adell collided. She was headed out of the station and he was swaggering in. His filth touched her crisp clothes. She was appalled and wasn’t afraid to let him or anyone else know it.

“My God! Have you heard of a bath?” She wiped the residue of his touch frantically off of the sleeve of her blouse.

He was a white man, but you couldn't tell this at first glance. His skin was buried beneath a thick film of ash. He was missing teeth and smelled of liquor, urine, and other body funk. There were no shoes on his feet, so you can imagine the blisters that covered them.

"I'm so sorry, Ma'am. I'm a little lightheaded hadn't had a bite since I passed through Chicago. You wouldn't have some change to spare would you?"

She was just about to give him a piece of her mind and storm off, but something clicked. He needed something from her. If she bent and gave it to him, he would be obligated to give her something in return. This would work well, and she would even throw in a pair of her husband's old shoes to sweeten the deal. What hobo could refuse such an offer? She smiled a crooked smile- an action that almost scared the man out of the door.

"You must forgive me. I've just been in a bit of a rush lately. I'm so sorry if I offended you. You said you need some change?" The man nodded without hesitation "Well, I might be willing to give you a few cents if you can do something for me."

"As long as it don't involve selling my soul I'm game." He spoke with a Kentucky accent, bootleg whisky was hot on his breath.

"Oh, it's nothing really. I just need a mailbox taken up from my yard and another one put in." She watched his face closely for a reaction. All she could really see of it were his eyes. They were as round and silver as dimes. Pleasingly, he did not seem bothered by the request, but rather anxious.

"Ah, That ain't nothing. Lead the way."

They walked the length of Main Street. Her head was held high as usual. Her arms were folded securely beneath her bountiful bosom. With each step her purse flapped against her bodice, making a soft thudding sound. She was happy to have had the chance meeting with the hobo, but wasn't about to let down her guard or purse for an instant. Everyone watched the duo as they strolled down Main Street. Some from their porches just shook their heads and muttered unmentionables. But she didn't care. Let them talk.

The hobo did as told. He uprooted the old and put in the new. He got some nasty stares the whole while, but just like the Missus he didn't care. He was getting some money in his pocket, a free pair of shoes, and the woman even promised to wrap him up some leftovers- today was a good day. Heaven had bent down long enough for him to get a snag of it. He even whistled his way through the task. And when he finished there was a newly erected mailbox, crafted of Cedar, and handsomely engraved with the family's new proud name, "O'Behr" and the house's number "1012". It was divine to the Missus, but a monstrosity to the town's inhabitants. They looked at it with much disdain. Some even talked about chopping it down. They couldn't believe the audacity of this outsider, who was coming in trying to make like she was better than they, like their stuff wasn't good enough for her. Even that yellow gal across the way hadn't been so bold. The most she ever did was dress like she was still a part of that place across yonder. But she never touched her mailbox- never even made her yard look better than anyone else's. She and that boy just hid themselves away as quiet as ghosts. That in itself was an insult, but it held nothing against tearing down a mailbox and putting up a new one- not in the least. If Adell's actions before then had built a case against her, this one definitely finalized it.

She was an outsider, and she could not be trusted or even tolerated- and that was final. Her husband could be tolerated however, because he was blood kin to Miss Ruthie, and besides that he was just the opposite of his wife. He knew he came from humble beginnings and never tried to hide it no matter how much prestige his doctor status brought him. That was redeeming enough, not to mention that he had come back to his fold to help those who could not help themselves, you couldn't do much better than that.

Being the good-natured person that he was, he did not contest the girl staying overnight. Her boy was ill. She needed to be there. To refuse her would mean having to answer to a higher power, and that he could not do. There wasn't any length of study or enough years in practice to merit such a challenge. So it was no surprise that he succumbed to the voices within and spoke in the girl's defense.

So she stayed. The sweet girl, Sojourner, was kind enough to make her a pallet on the floor. Dahlia lay quietly, listening to the rich voice of the doctor, making calls to this colleague and that colleague, probing for answers about the boy's condition. Only a few residences in The Down's had the luxury of a phone. There were four to be exact- the preacher's residence, the undertaker's, Doctor Morrow's, and now the O'Behr's. Dahlia could have a phone if she wanted, but she preferred not to. Who would she call? She cut herself off from all ties to Lafitte, not to mention newfound friends were hard to come by. The closest people she could call friends were Miss Ruthie and Charletta Mae. It didn't make sense to get a phone to talk to them since they only lived a whisper away- besides that they could not afford one.

The doctor's voice, eventually lulled Dahlia into a deep sleep. Morning arrived sooner than a blink to Dahlia, but for Adell it seemed a lifetime in coming. She spent

most of her night wide awake, ears intent on hearing something out of place. The doctor was up most of the night reading and calling folks. Counting sheep for Adell was not an option. She needed to be alert at all times, for there was a strange woman in her house- a strange woman that had taken a liking to her husband from the start. Any woman that could kiss a man before even her eyes are all the way opened could not be trusted. Even when the doctor finally dragged himself to bed, Adell was not at peace. Eventually her eyes did close, but her thoughts churned into dreams of lust, and the sad thing about it was that she had no part in them. No, morning did not come soon enough for her.

Acanthus awoke in strange surroundings. He did not recognize the neatly covered walls, or the shiny wood floor- nor the delicate scent of flowers. He had to feel his face, arms, stomach and legs to make sure that he was still of solid form and had not been transformed into some transparent heavenly being. He arose, and headed for the nearest window. He could see his house across the way. But where was his Ma? And why was he here? The room was empty save for his presence. He was afraid. Someone opened the door. It was a girl, carrying a tray of breakfast food. She smiled as she entered. He was distrustful of what lay behind that smile so he did not smile back. She did not seem bothered and soon exited the room after lying the tray on the coffee table. She was gone in a blink, and he stood frozen. The aroma of the scrambled eggs and grits weakened him though. It seemed like it had been ages since he had eaten last. He soon devoured the food without any shame. If the girl had poisoned him, then he would just have to die.

He was feeling a little comfortable now, having stuffed himself. The girl had left the door ajar too, and he was able to hear the soft sound of his mother's voice trailing in from a nearby room. He remembered little of what happened after Sister Claire beat him- only that his Ma had not come when he called for her. This made his heart ache. He plumped himself back onto the couch. The little girl entered the room once more, this time carrying a glass of milk. She looked at the empty tray, then back at him.

"You must have been some hungry."

He said nothing. She was a girl, and could not be trusted.

"Here's some milk. My Daddy says milk builds strong teeth and bones."

She placed the glass upon a coaster on the table. Her smile seemed permanently etched into her face.

"You had your Mamma scared."

Acanthus remained silent. His legs dangled from the couch. He looked in the opposite direction to avoid her face. He did not want to see another girl's face. He did not want to feel the sting of what a stare might bring. It was easier to talk to air- easier to imagine an invisible face. And that was what she was to him- invisible. Charletta Mae would be invisible to him too now, and his Mama was almost getting there, yes, almost but not quite.

Seeing the boy's state, Sojourner did not press him further for conversation. She merely quietly seated herself in a chair on the other side of the room, and studied him. Soon her daddy and Acanthus' Ma entered the room. Dahlia entered the room as abrupt as a tornado. She jetted to the couch and held her son close to her heart. She was glad that he was awake now- glad that her last link to Elias had not been stolen away. The

doctor explained to her the boy's condition. He used a lot of medical terms- said the boy had some rare form of hypersomnia that struck at odd intervals. It was in his blood and hers too, and maybe even further back in the lines. She did not understand all of his medical jargon, but what she gathered from his explanation was that the sleep was spurred on by high emotional situations. All of her life her Maman had accused her of being melodramatic, but she never thought in all of her days that it was something medical, borderlining on psychological. The doctor was trying to tell her in a polite way that she and her boy were crazy- at least this was the way she interpreted it. That's why she stormed off the way she did in the middle of their conversation. She and her boy were going to get out of that house before she said or did something that was unforgivable.

“Miss Fountainebleu, you must understand I wasn't trying to imply anything negative about your character or his.”

She ignored him. She grabbed her boy's hand and stormed out of there without a thought of looking behind.

Chapter

13

Life went on for the duo at 1011, the bare existence that it was. Dahlia refused to let her son go back over to Lafitte for any reason. And with little surprise, her Maman did not put up much of a fight. After all, the boy had marred their good name, and she would have to do her best to repair what he had torn down.

As expected, the two kept themselves closed off from the world for some time. They wallowed in their own misery. Silence kept the house still. Inner thoughts were swirling a mile a minute though- too fast for words. But for them there was comfort in silence- comfort in not having to explain- comfort in knowing what already was. Acanthus didn't even let himself out the house to go visit his dear friend Charletta Mae. He vowed to not see her for a long time, all because of a freckle-faced girl named Therese, who had ate him up and spat him out without a second thought. No, girls were not creatures to be trusted. The only one he could trust was his Maman, and even she at times seemed to fall short of that privilege. But he could tolerate her because she was blood, motherhood had earned her that right.

Charletta Mae did not take too well to being closed off from her only friends, even though she had been used to their hissy fits. She longed to be in that house with

them to share in their pain- to let them know that they were not alone. Nothing kept her from trying though. Several mornings she tried knocking on their front door, back door, and side windows. She brought them some food, but no one stirred within. The floor didn't even creak. She was heartbroken. It was hard being friends with folks that closed you off when times got hard. Her Auntie Ruthie scolded her for her foolish behavior.

“Gal, you need to come on in here with all that foolishness. Leave them people alone. If they woulda wanted you in there they woulda been opened that door.”

In those moments Charletta Mae would look at her auntie with much disdain. Charletta Mae saw her as a grouchy old woman, who always seemed to steal her joy away. Sass would fall heavy on the girl's tongue.

“Aw, Auntie, why don't you leave me alone. I ain't bothering you, no.”

“You just let me catch a hold to you.” And at that Auntie Ruthie would make her way down the steps, her old legs and knees creaking along the way, but by then the girl of fourteen would be half way down Main Street, as if fire had been lit to her feet. She would stay away from the house clean near till suppertime, hoping somehow that the drifting hours would ease away her auntie's anger.

Sometimes Irma Jackson would allow her to sit in her salon. There, Charletta would find a quiet corner and bury herself behind beauty magazines. In the books, she would marvel at the glamorous women with their perfectly marceled hair, pert noses, and thin lips. If she had but one wish, she would wish to be transformed into one them so that she could have a perfect life. With a perfect life she wouldn't have to worry about parents who conveniently forgot about her, nor about a boy of nine who suddenly erased her from his life. The advertisements in the magazines always promised happiness-

straighter hair, brighter skin, and a figure to die for. No one in Irma's salon looked quite like the women in the magazines, though they were beautiful all the same- but nothing stopped them from trying to transform themselves into what God had not intended them to be. Jessie always requested a third pressing, sometimes even a fourth. Delores always wanted to know when Irma was going to get up to date and start using lye, hot combs were coming to be a thing of the past. And then there was Becky, who relentlessly wanted to know who had the best bleaching product. Some of them had the same desires of the little girl, though they would never admit it because she was an outsider. According to Backwaters' folks they had no connections to outsiders.

Even though there were some women in the salon who wallowed in dreams of drastic transformations, there were a handful who wallowed in and loved the skins their Maker had blessed them with. One such person was Precious Dolby. She wore her blackness like a fine mink coat. She carried herself so divinely that it almost made a person like Becky second-guess the notion of bleaching cream. She carried the air of a movie star. No one could understand why she made weekly visits to the salon, she always looked in tact- even after a long day's work. Many just assumed that she frequented the place weekly as a means of socializing. After all she was a people-person, one who didn't take to hiding like that quiet beauty at 1011. No, Precious was the type of woman that women loved and hated all in one blow, the type of woman that made you want to hold on a little tighter to your husband in her presence. And the same type you would pry for answers on how to keep your man satisfied behind closed doors when the sun went down and the children were fast asleep. Charletta Mae admired her from a distance, for she was too shy to approach her- too afraid that she would turn her away

before she even got her first word out. But one day something happened that she, in all her wishing, could have never expected. Precious Dolby sat by her on the waiting couch. Irma and her crew had too many heads to do that day. Everyone was trying to get dolled up for the Juneteenth celebration- a celebration that commemorated their separation from the ties to slavery, and rejoiced in their latching on to freedom. It was a stepping out event that necessitated the need for a fancy do, some new duds, and a reason to jiggle till the sun came up. Single women needed the best of dos so they could attract the right beaus, and married women needed fancying up so that they could hold on to the ones they already had. So you could imagine the loads of women that piled into Irma's. She was booked full for both that Thursday and Friday. Everyone waited until the week's end to get their hair done so that it would be fresh as possible for Saturday's event. This being the case, the place was packed by the time Precious came in after work on that Friday. She had to wait. There was an empty spot on the waiting couch next to Charletta Mae. Precious sat there. She rubbed her tired ankles, and watched the little girl suspiciously from the corner of her eye. The girl was engrossed in a magazine- eyes transfixed to a bleaching cream ad that showed a before and after picture. She couldn't tell, but the girl's heart was beating a mile a minute. She was touched that someone so pretty had opted to sit next to her. Precious leaned closer to her.

“You don't need to be thinking on that, no. That stuff don't work. Besides, you best be grateful for the skin God put you in. Wishing can get you into a whole world of trouble.”

Charletta Mae was too nervous to look her in the face, so she kept her eyes glued to the magazine, but didn't fall short of giving the woman a piece of her mind.

“I can look at what I want. It ain’t none of your business. And I wasn’t studying ‘bout this no ways. People can look if they want- that’s what they made magazines for.”

Precious cocked up an eyebrow, “Lil girl, you need to learn you some manners. You ack like you been raised by wolves. You don’t talk to no grown folks that way. Why if I had a good mind, I’d take you over my knee and give you a good spanking. But I’m too tired to fool with you, yeah.” With that she commenced rubbing her ankles again.

After a while of watching the woman from her side-eyed view, Charletta Mae gathered enough courage to ask her a question. She laid the magazine flat on her lap and looked into the woman’s face,

“What you so tired for- ain’t you a house nigga?”

Precious was appalled. That word sunk through her like a knife, “‘Nigga’ ain’t a word, lil girl, and I don’t appreciate you using it in the same breath as me.”

“Well, it ain’t like you out in the fields working. What you got to be tired of?”

“You just full of sass, I see. I know Mama Mae taught you better.”

Charletta held her tongue. She resumed reading her magazine. She didn’t mean to sass the woman, especially since she was so pretty, but the woman made her mad- she was dipping into business that wasn’t any of her concern. Besides, if she wanted to dream about lighter skin then that was her right to do so. The way the woman sized it up made it look like she was committing a sin, and Charletta Mae knew in her heart that it wasn’t a sin to want to be beautiful. Charletta Mae felt remorseful though. She didn’t mean to talk smart to one of her idols. She had to repair the damage.

“Why you in here anyway? You already pretty enough.”

The corners of Precious' mouth turned up a bit, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to get on my good side."

Charletta just shook her head.

"Well, that's awful nice for you to say, whether it was the truth or a lie."

"What you know about wishing getting you into trouble?" Charletta Mae inquired. Somehow the woman's earlier comment puzzled her. It carried such a weight of heaviness.

"I loved a man once. He was a beautiful something- tall like an oak, brown as earth, and had a smile that could cut through you. His name was Elias Green. He was something. But I wanted him so much- wished on him hard, even bent down in prayer a time or two. But he never saw me. I wished too hard on him and he disappeared."

Precious was getting lost a bit, doting on the memory of the man that once was. Some nearby women jumped in on the talk. They had memories of their own that were rekindled by the very mention of the legend's name.

"Yes Lawd, you weren't the only one that loved you some him. Shoot, I don't think a woman in this town with a pulse didn't dream about him." A woman in curlers shouted from her chair.

"Now that was a man. You don't find too many of them now a days." Another said.

"Ain't that the truth. He was everything- wealthy in the heart and in the pocket." Irma threw in.

“Well, what happened to him?” Charletta Mae inquired. She was becoming dizzy with the talk. It was exciting to hear these women talk about a man that sounded more like a prince, a dream in waiting.

“Nobody knows.” Irma volunteered. The steam from the hot comb was rising up to her face like resurrected spirits.

“Oh somebody know. They just ain’t telling.” The woman with the curlers replied.

“Humph. Y’all know as well as I know that it got something to do with that gal at 1011. She ate him up and spat him out like sour leftovers. Makes me mad even thinking about her. Coming on this side and taking one of our own. You’d think they’d have enough blue-veiners to spread amongst themselves, but no they gotta be coming ovah here taking the little men we do have.”

“Don’t it make you sick?” Someone in the heart of the room commented.

“Don’t it ever?” Another one added.

Precious remained silent now. No one knew the mystery behind Elias’ disappearance but she, Madame Fountainbleu, and that devil-woman Ma Sabine.

“You mean Miss Dahlia married the prince?” Charletta Mae pressed, with eyes nearly leaping from their sockets.

“No. Things never came to that. He was her toy though for a good year and a half. I suppose he was too beneath her to marry.” Irma butted in.

“That ain’t no surprise. Her people raised her that way.” The woman in curlers replied.

Someone in the back decided to join in the juicy conversation, “I ain’t defending her or nothing, but she ain’t like that. She different. If she was like the rest of them she wouldn’t have even looked that man’s way. You know he didn’t pass their paper bag test.”

“Well, Maye do got a point. There must’ve been some kinda love there, they produced a son.”

“Mistakes happen.” The woman in curlers defended. “Shoot, I got two of my own.” Her comment produced a few smiles and chuckles here and there.

“Shoot ain’t that the truth? I done had my share of near scares, and thank God they ain’t surface. Especially since narry one woulda been Frank’s.” Irma replied.

“Guh, hush your mouth, you know how words walk in this town.”

“Maye, you know as well as I do I ain’t the only one that do some stepping out. Shoot y’all hoes wouldn’t be in this joint if y’all ain’t have some stepping out on your minds, you heard?”

Laughter filled the room.

“Preach girl, preach.” The woman in curlers roared.

Talk began to swirl in the direction of lust, but Precious didn’t partake of it. Normally she would, but resurrected memories clouded her mind with something else. Charletta Mae clung onto their every word, hoping somehow to learn a thing or two. She remained as quiet as mouse, hoping by making herself invisible, they would hide nothing from her.

Chapter 14

Guilt is a heavy something. It will eat away at you until it gets its full, and even then its gnawing doesn't stop. All that it leaves behind is the pain of its bite- teeth prints permanently etched into the soul and mind. It haunts you in your sleeping and in your waking. Suddenly you long to play God for just a moment, because a moment is all one needs to turn back the hands of time. Rewinding time can erase that event, that word, that something that let guilt in-in the first place. But no, playing God wouldn't solve that problem all together, for even He who sits on high doesn't dare fool with time. Everything must go forward, never backwards. So you have no choice but to allow the guilt and its pain to stay lumped up at the bottom of your soul until it is exorcised by someone or something that takes pity on you. This 'something' or 'someone' was what Precious Dolby was waiting for. Guilt had lived within her for some nine years now, and was steady eating away.

On an occasion or two she tried letting loose of it, but didn't succeed- almost but not quite. Nearly a year after Elias' disappearance, she brought herself to the steps of 1011. She was visibly shaking as each step brought her closer to that door. She almost didn't knock. In fact, she was in the midst of turning full circle, but something made her

retrace her steps. The first knock was a soft knock, like that of a little child's. The second was a little harder, but still there was no answer. Precious grew hopeful. Maybe this was a sign from God that she need not follow through. Perhaps the weight of the guilt she carried for so long was penance enough for her crime. Needless to say, she didn't knock a third time, but the door opened all the same. Slowly. Dahlia stood there with a fat belly and disappointed eyes. She had hoped that just by some chance Elias had returned. Yes, it was true that by then a year had almost passed since she last saw him, but there was still hope- wasn't there? As long as breath was in her she wouldn't let loose of hope.

"Oh Precious, it's just you." She said softly, trying at best to disguise the sadness.

Precious turned around, mummified. Her mind couldn't make her mouth move. So she stared for what seemed a lifetime. She looked into Dahlia's midnight blues, they seemed ready to erupt at any given moment. They reminded her of her own. No, not the color, but the weight they carried. Of course, the heaviness that drew Dahlia's down was that of sorrow. But to the naked eye, sorrow and guilt leave behind the same aftermath of want.

Finally Precious stumbled upon words, "I..I...I...uh came to see if you could ..uh.uh..spare some sugar. I'm making some cake for myself and fell short a half a cup."

"I'm sorry, I haven't been to Pap's lately. With the baby being due soon I don't get out too much."

"Oh, I shoulda known. I'm so sorry to bother you, Miss Dahlia. Please forgive me. I'll just check with Mama Mae to see if she got any to spare....You need me to get you anything while I'm out?"

"No thank you. Sweet of you to offer though. To tell the truth I can't keep

nothing down now a days. Soon as I put it in this one spit it out.” She looked down at the roundness of her belly.

“Ooh yeah, you look ready to pop.”

“Don’t I know it?” Dahlia sucked in a deep breath. Memories were swirling too fast, almost too fast to catch tears. She wished the woman would soon leave before she embarrassed herself in front of her.

Precious lingered a bit. She wanted to tell her the mystery. Maybe even after the revelation the two of them could go down to Ma Sabine and have her reverse the curse. But no, that was only a pipedream. There was no way in the world the woman betrayed would forgive her, let alone let her live. And then there was the baby to think about too. News of the mystery could easily cause Dahlia to lose the little one. Precious could not bare the thought of two guilts eating away at her- that would surely be her end. So she decided to leave well enough alone, at least until the baby came.

“Miss Dahlia, you sho you don’t need anything?”

Dahlia shook her head.

“You have a good evening then.”

“You do the same.”

The two women parted. Precious felt even heavier going down the steps than before. And behind closed doors Dahlia let loose of tears, for hope had slapped her in the face once more and this time she could not hold back the river.

By the time the baby came, Precious had lost the little courage she had. There was no way in the world she could shatter Dahlia that way. Dahlia needed to be strong to raise that little boy. Besides that, Madame Fountainbleu made sure that Precious didn’t

open her mouth. She gave her a lump sum, and an extra day off each week, not to mention vowed that if word ever got out about their dealings with Ma Sabine, Precious would never live to regret it. With this done and said, Precious had no choice but to keep the secret. This however did not stop her from trying to mend the damage. She took to going to church more often, even included Dahlia and the boy in her prayers. She even took them things for the first few months of the boy's life until Madame put an end to it. She didn't want the likes of her around her girl or grandbaby- she must keep her distance. Precious could do nothing but obey, for according to Madame she had bought her soul.

There were times though when Precious considered going back to Ma Sabine to have her reverse what had been done, but what was the use? It was hard to keep secrets in a place like Backwaters. Deeds never went unseen- somebody was always watching. There was no telling who had witnessed her and Madame's visit to Ma Sabine years back. Just because nobody said anything, didn't mean they didn't see the goings on. It was a secret waiting to erupt. Precious just hoped that she would be the one to reveal it, for that would be part of her redemption. The only thing she was waiting for was the day when Madame would close her eyes forever, and even that seemed a long time in coming. She did not want to wait that long though. The thought of dying with all of that weight pulling on her weakened her sometimes, sometimes to the point where she almost confessed all to the boy.

Often times she would run into the boy and his Mother at Pap's. Sometimes the boy did not want to go in and make grocery so he would sit outside the storefront and eavesdrop on the conversations of the men gathered there. She would see him there, looking as fragile and out of place as a sinner in church. He seemed to draw her to him,

and she came without a fight. One summer evening encounter brought her the closest to ever revealing the secret.

“What you sittin out here wit these oldtimers for, young stuff?”

Acanthus just shrugged his shoulders.

“Need some company?”

He shrugged again, though his mind welcomed the pretty lady’s presence. She propped herself at the edge of the porch. The sight and sound of her wholesome hobbyhorse nestling against the wood stirred some talk from the men.

“Precious, you gone start somethin, yeah. What you sittin ovah that wit jail bait for? You need to come on ovah here wit the real men.”

“Now you know, Sammy, I ain’t studyin bout y’all, no.” A smile graced her face. She wallowed in their attention. “Y’all know good and well, I likes my men young and tender.”

“Naw Dahling, you needs one aged and seasoned. That be the best kind, yeah.”

“Y’all is a mess.” At that, she waved them off and concentrated on the young one, “Don’t pay them no mind, sugar. Come on walk me to my door. My feet so tired. I need some help with these bags.”

Acanthus looked apprehensive.

“Oh, don’t you worry, you’ll be back ‘fore your Mama come out. You know my house just a piece away.”

Still unsure, Acanthus slowly rose from his seat.

“Come on. You can’t be scared all your life.” She reached for his hand and helped him hop down from the porch.

The men did not let them leave without some more jests of words.

“Y’all gone off, huh?”

“Jail bait, you best come back the way you left.”

Precious could not resist joining in on the fun. She threw words over her shoulder as she and the boy walked hand in hand down the stretch of Main Street, “And if he don’t?”

The men just jeered- all the while doting on how her firm buttocks jostled underneath her maid’s uniform.

When she and the boy reached her house a few doors down, she lead him into the house and told him where to sit her things. He felt awkward coming into her home. He and his mother hardly ever did any visiting. Homes were private places you just didn’t let anyone into, save for a select few. He did not feel that he had done anything to merit such a welcoming from the tall lady, and jumped at the chance to get back outside.

“No need for rush, sugar. Miss Precious ain’t gonna bite you. Your Grandmon would have my hide.” This she said as she slipped out of her work shoes, and scavenged her drawers for something comfortable to put on. He shielded his eyes as she undressed with her back turned away from him.

“Don’t mind me. You ain’t got nothing to be scared of. It’s just a woman’s body. There’s gonna come a time soon when you’ll learn to appreciate such a treasure. You already a heartbreaker with them eyes of yours.” She tousled the soft curls atop his head, and winked at him, “I see Mama Mae’s niece, Charletta Mae, been tugging at your heart lately. I remember when I was that young. I had a thing for your father, long before your Ma got an itch of him.”

She sat herself at the edge of the bed, facing him. He still stood, and looked uncomfortable.

“Your father could break a heart before he even knew it. You gone be the same way. I see it in your eyes, but you don’t know it yet.”

Acanthus looked at her doubtfully.

“Yes, I know you don’t believe, but time will tell.” A lost look surfaced in her eyes. “But you just be sure to think about the hearts you breaking before it’s too late, and a whole heap of people get hurt..Your father didn’t think...not a once..I think I wanted him most of all, but he never saw me...That’s a painful feeling- knowing you there, and your feelings there, but the one you love ain’t able to see you- even though you standing right there in his face.” She fought back the sting of tears as she looked the boy boldly into his face- a face as round and innocent as a cherub’s. He stared back into her eyes. Something about the way she talked then soothed him. It was almost like the way he imagined his Ma would talk to him about his Pa whenever she got the nerve. He clung to her every word, for he wanted to know about this legend that conveniently disappeared before his arrival. This woman was telling him things that no one else had been brave enough to reveal, and his eyes thanked her for it. This put her at ease.

“You know, you gonna learn that love is a blessing and a curse when you get older. It’ll make you feel all warm and happy inside one minute, then turn around and stab you before that warmth even wears off...I ain’t proud of a lot of things. I been carrying something inside of me that I ain’t been able to let loose of in a long while. It’s crazy what love will make you do or say or wish...You ever wish?”

Acanthus nodded without hesitation. He knew what this woman was talking

about. It was as if she read straight through him and saw his longing for his Ma's undivided love- a love that would remain split up until the memory of his father dissipated.

"What you wish for? You got everything. You a man, or soon to be one. You come from a rich line of folks. You got a color that can pass, a Ma that spoils and pampers you rotten with fancy clothes. What could you ever want for? You see me, I have a right to wish for a lot of things 'cause I ain't got nothing. I come home to an empty bed every night. No chillun to hug up with or holler at when the time comes. And though I have a color that's as fine as any other in the rainbow, the world will never recognize and appreciate its beauty- not as long as the world's been whitewashed."

"I think it's lovely." Acanthus assured as he caught one of her tears with his finger before it rolled down the full of her cheek. She could do nothing but smile that grand smile of hers- teeth all aglow.

"You see, I told you-you gone be a heartbreaker, you already getting a head start." Her body gently shook with laughter, and more tears fell. It was hard to discern if they were tears of joy or sorrow. Something inside of her felt like it was lifting- oh what a feeling it was. She grabbed and held her stomach. A serious look graced her face, "I must tell you something." She took his hand into her own. "I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me. If you don't, then I understand. But this is something I can't hide much longer. I don't know when I'm gonna be called home, but whenever that time comes, I don't wanna take nothing with me. You understand?"

Acanthus nodded.

"No you don't. You too young, but I'm gonna tell you anyway."

But then there was a knock at the door that broke their private meeting. It was Dahlia coming for her boy.

“Precious, is ‘Canthus in there?”

Precious and the boy remained still for a moment, each hoping that the stillness would push the one outside away long enough for them to finish what was started. But their wish was not granted. Dahlia was persistent with the knocking.

“Precious? Precious?”

Precious slowly rose, wiped traces of tears away, and headed up front, “Yeah, we in here.” She yelled. She briefly looked over her shoulder at the boy, and gave him a questioning eye, or rather a pleading one. She wanted him to promise not to tell his mother about their discussion- at least not yet. His eyes assured her that he would not let out a word.

They met Dahlia at the door.

“I’m sorry I stole your boy, Miss Dahlia. My load was so heavy, and my feet couldn’t take another step.”

Dahlia looked at her questioningly, but smiled and nodded out of politeness.

“It’s quite alright.” Dahlia replied, then looked to her son through the screen door. He looked caged, ”Ready?”

Acanthus nodded and stepped out onto the porch.

“Y’all have a good evening now. And thank you so kindly, sir, for your help. Here’s a penny for your trouble.” She withdrew a copper coin from the depth of her pocket, and handed it out to the boy.

“Oh Precious, that’s not necessary. He ain’t gonna do nothing but go buy candy

with it. I'm trying to get him out of that bad habit. But thank you anyway. 'Canthus, say 'thank you'."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"Well, it's best we get on our way. You take care."

Precious nodded, "Well, I guess I'll make it up to you some other kinda way."

She winked at the boy, pinched his cheek, and bided them good evening once more.

She watched the two descend, and prayed silently for guidance. The boy looked back at her. She searched his face for reassurance, and he searched hers for things unknown.

Chapter 15

He could not stay away from Charletta Mae too long. Even though there was still a sting in his heart and a distrust of the female sex rustling around in there, he could not deny that she was his other half. She nursed him through many things, played and laughed with him, understood him. She made him feel safe. He had no choice but to forgive her for being a girl, for their reunion was necessary for his survival. He could not stay cooped up away from the world forever like his Ma. Staying cooped up for long periods of time made it harder for him to readjust to life outside of 1011. It made him fearful of people's eyes, and the thoughts swirling behind those eyes, for he knew that they looked at him with judgement, maybe even contempt. This made him nervous, because he knew he could do nothing to correct their misjudgments. Often times this nervousness would cause him to stare blankly into the distance. Staring beyond the physical realm provided him a comfort zone, because it enabled him to avoid those judging eyes and faces, but it made him appear abnormal to everyone, except to his Ma and Charletta Mae. Charletta Mae always helped ease his transition back into the world.

He and his Ma stayed locked up two weeks after the incident with the good doctor. They turned away almost everyone from their door, except for Dahlia's sister

Camellia. She was seeking to mend broken ties. Family was important to her. The little boy's near death experience made her realize this all the more. After his trauma had passed she kept in close contact with him and his Ma. She visited them every chance she could. Acanthus enjoyed her visits. In fact he stayed curled up close to her, like a cat desperately seeking attention, the whole length of her stay. The two women would talk their lips off about everything under the sun- memories, old faces, clothes, love, life, death, and yes even sometimes about their Maman, though talk of her sometimes soured the conversation. Acanthus didn't know his Ma could talk so much. She didn't talk that much to him. But he was happy that she found someone to confide in, and even happier that-that someone came from Lafitte, for it gave him reassurance that all life on that side was not as bad as his Ma made him believe.

In two weeks time Dahlia gained enough strength to face the world again. Acanthus could not discern what had spurred on the urging. Perhaps it was the comfort of her sister's voice, an inner whispering, or inspiration from a rising sun. He did not know. All he knew is that one morning she arose and resumed her work of laundering. She explained to her white customers across town that she had been ill those two weeks, and apologized for the lapse in service. As with her previous episodes, they did not understand the nature of her illness but accepted her apologies all the same. They did not ponder too much on her condition, for she was just merely the pretty colored girl who cleaned and pressed their garments. All that mattered was that the work was done.

Dahlia's return to work was Acanthus' confirmation that it was okay to go outside again and reunite with the world. After eating his breakfast, he made it up in his mind to visit his other half. Some inner urging made him bring her a ten cents bag of lemon

drops. She adored the gesture, and hugged him. It was as simple as that. The two rejoined as if those two weeks of distance never happened. Besides, during that time she found a new friend to keep her company- the woman Precious Dolby. After their encounter at Irma's salon, the two became attached to one another for their own reasons. Charletta Mae needed someone to fill the void that Acanthus and his Ma left in her heart, and Precious needed someone to help her forget about her nagging guilt. But now that her other half returned to her, she kept her distance from Precious Dolby, for she did not want to deprive herself of spending as much time as possible with Acanthus. Too much time had already been lost. Besides that she did not want to share him with anyone else. She treasured their private meetings, though she was growing tired of playing kiddy games with him. She was older now and longed more for grown-up things such as conversing, picnicking, holding hands, kissing, and dreaming about the future. Besides that, she felt awkward about running around now that her breasts had grown the size of grapefruits. They jiggled with her every move. There was also the added worry that at a certain time of the month she had to be more cautious about her skirts rising too far in the midst of play, or that something did not fall out that wasn't supposed to. Acanthus did not like this new person that Charletta Mae was transforming into, although he did his best to adapt. But more often he found himself going off to play by himself, and leaving her with his Ma. Charletta would come over in the evenings after school to come see Acanthus, but then she would end up spending most of her time with his Ma. They would sit out on the front porch and talk their women talk. But unlike the talks that his Ma shared with his Tee Camellia, Acanthus did not feel a part of their conversations. He always felt like he was intruding with his urgings for Charletta to hurry the conversations

along so that they would have enough playtime at Winbush Hills before the sun went down. He did not like sharing her with his Ma. She was his playmate, not his Ma's.

"You go on 'head, Acanthus, I'll meet up with you." Was Charletta Mae's frequent response.

Sometimes she would join him quickly, but at other times she kept him waiting-sometimes too long. When those times arose he would end up playing by himself, or just sit and eat clay dirt. Eating clay dirt always soothed Charletta, and he too had taken to the habit. He didn't find much soothing in it though, but figured that the more he forced himself to eat it, the more likely he would grow to love it as she did. On occasion when Charletta Mae didn't show up as expected, Acanthus would end up having to defend himself against neighborhood boys, who taunted him for playing with a girl, being a sissy, and having a crazy Ma. He would lose those fights when she wasn't around, for with her absence so too was the absence of his strength. Losing those fights was cause for more teasing and harsher beatings. He would come home with scraps, bruises galore, torn clothing, and a wounded spirit. His Ma and Charletta Mae would be there to nurse his wounds. There were times too when Dahlia would storm off to the houses of the bullies and confront their parents. They always promised her that they would chastise and beat their children for the wrong done, but these were just empty promises, promised to her only out of politeness and to avoid a scene. They merely warned their boys to stay away from that crazy lady's son because there was no telling what her mind could cause her to do in defense of the boy. These warnings only were heeded for a day or so, a week at the most, and then the beatings would resume. With each one, Acanthus grew angrier

and angrier with Charletta Mae. There came a point where he almost stopped playing with her all together. She could do nothing to amend the damage, though she tried.

Sometimes, if she was lucky enough, she could get him to walk her to Pap's so that they could get a bite to eat, or they would go down to the train station and watch the travelers load and unload themselves and their things. She tried making up fun games they could play while watching the people. The object of one game was to try and figure out where someone was coming from, and what adventure they were running off to. The person that came up with the best story won the game. It was an inventive game that made them think more and more about the world outside of Backwaters. But the game lost its luster for Charletta Mae when she started thinking about her folks up in Maryland who conveniently forgot about her. It lost its luster too for Acanthus when he started thinking about his Pa who left him before he was even born. Sometimes an eerie feeling would overcome him. In the midst of playing the game, he would find himself studying the faces of the men. He found himself searching their faces for traces of his father- though he had no idea what his father looked like, save that he was tall, brown, and handsome. This made him ashamed that he did not know his own father's face. The game would stop then, and he and Charletta would find themselves staring blankly into nowhere. The sound of a train whistle, or someone asking them for directions would bring them to. Many times people would ask for their assistance with carrying bags, and would pay them handsomely for it- sometimes with money, at other times with food or trinkets. On one occasion an old woman gave Charletta a sprig of rosemary, secured together with a scarlet red ribbon. She assured the girl that if she wore it to her breast devoutly, love and good luck would knock at her door. This was Charletta's most

treasured trinket, because it promised her something more precious than money could afford. She wore it religiously by securing it to the inside of her brassiere. Silently she hoped that-that good luck and hope would come packaged in the slim frame of Acanthus C. Fountainbleu.

Acanthus' most prized trinket was a signed baseball cap given to him by a rookie player from the Negro League. Acanthus saw him in the distance. He was a tall dark man of firm build, who carried himself with an air of pride and importance. Acanthus silently tried to guess where the man had just come from and where he was going. A part of him hoped that he was his father, who had finally come to his senses and decided to return to his woman and child. What gave the boy all the more hope was that the man stared back at him with some hint of a smile. Acanthus was not one to be so bold as to initiate talk with strangers, but the man's eyes gave him encouragement. He walked over to him and offered to help him with his bags.

"I got 'em, young blood." The man assured with a thick Georgia accent.

"Where you going?" Acanthus heard himself ask.

"On my way up to Pittsburgh. We gotta a home game this upcoming Saturday. You play ball?"

Acanthus shook his head.

"You're a strange one. You ever tried?"

Acanthus shook his head once more.

"What you afraid of- ball gone hit you?"

"I ain't so good at sports, sir. They say I got butterfingers."

“Aw, that ain’t nothing but a word, young blood. Can’t let words scare ya. That’ll keep you from a many things. Here, let me show you how simple it is.” The man and all of his 210 pounds of him stood up. He withdrew from one of his bags a bat and handed it to the boy. Crouching his six ten frame behind the boy, he grabbed hold of his arms and positioned them in proper form. He told him to imagine that they were on a field and a ball was headed straight for him. He told him to hit the oncoming ball with all of his might. Acanthus, with his bony arms failed on the first attempt.

“Loosen it up.” The player coached, and Acanthus tried a second attempt, this time with some improvement.

“Getting better.” The man assured. On the third attempt, he guided the boy’s arms into the perfect swing, “You keep on practicing, you bound to get better. Maybe in a few years or so we’ll have a slot for you on the league, that sound good?”

Acanthus nodded enthusiastically.

“I tell you what. How bout I give you my cap. You wear it for good luck and practice everyday. When you ready for the league, you come look for me, hear? Bring this cap long with ya.” Acanthus’ heart raced as the man signed the cap. He had hoped that the man’s first letter of his name started with an “E”, for that would be a sign that he may be his father. But to his disappointment the name the man spelled out was Josh Gibson, not Elias Green. Sadness hung in the boy’s eyes, but he smiled at the man in thanks to disguise the disappointment. The man rubbed the boy’s head in the manner of an owner rubbing his prized puppy.

“Keep ya chin up, young blood, and remember what I said about that practice.”

And then he disappeared amongst the crowd of people going to and fro. Acanthus

stood there a while, soured by his departure. He put the cap on his head. It was much too big for him, but he convinced himself that he would grow into it. He would grow as tall and strong as the baseball player who had given it to him, and he would come looking for him some day to show him the man that he would become. He too would ride trains, and see the world outside of Backwaters, and maybe somewhere out there find his Pa too, and send him back to his Ma. He was convinced that these were the only things he needed to complete his world. With this new fire stirring within him, he didn't mind going off to Winbush Hills to play by himself. He began to practice, using thick sticks for baseball bats. He grew stronger with each swing. And yes, there came a time even when he stopped the other boys from beating up on him.

Unlike times before, he began to fight back- first with the stick, then eventually with his own hands. He of course, lost the first few fights, but at least then he was able to leave with some dignity, knowing that he did not go down without a struggle. He felt empowered. The scarlet blood dripping from his lips didn't bother him anymore, nor did the knicks and bruises on his face give him cause for shame. He wore them with pride, and there in his eyes came to grow a mark of defiance that stirred his Ma into worry. A part of her was relieved to see it there, for it marked the wearing away of softness- something of which she always looked for in her own dear brother Ambrose's eyes, but never found. She had fought many of Ambrose's fights, just as Charletta Mae had done for Acanthus. Ambrose never learned to fight back, but rather surrendered to his beatings without an ounce of shame. That was his tragic mistake- his holding on to the softness of youth. He would never become a man. It was a realization that Dahlia had to accept, for he had long since accepted his lot.

“Why don’t you fight them back, cher? I can’t be with you all the time. You gotta fight ’em off when I ain’t around. Don’t you know that?”

“I don’t wanna fight. I don’t like to fight.” Was his response.

“You like to get beat up?”

“No, t’ain’t that. Fighting just ain’t in my blood.”

With that remark, Dahlia’s eyebrows frowned. She turned red with madness. She almost wanted to sock him herself for saying such a thing, “Ambrose! We got the same blood running in us. If I can fight, you can fight too.”

“No, I can’t!” He yelled through tears.

His sobbing annoyed her, “Stop it! You gotta grow up. You gotta be a man.”

“I don’t gotta be nothing I don’t wanna be.” And with that he ran off to seek the comfort of his own mother’s arms or those of his StepMaman’s. That moment left an ache in her heart, left her numb for days. If Ambrose didn’t want to become a man, then what did want to become? She found no answers to that question, but loved her dear brother all the same, as any good sister would. The worry was still there though. It even surfaced in the rearing of her own son.

But now something new hung in Acanthus’ eyes, something that seemed to be a mixed blessing. This new thing seemed cause for more worry than the softness. And it made Charletta afraid as well, because Acanthus was growing so strong that he almost had no more need for her. She clung to her rosemary tighter in the deep of night, washed it with her tears, and prayed for things to stop spinning and changing. She wanted that old feeling resurrected, that feeling that came upon her when first she saw the boy. Back then she mistook him for a girl just as everyone else had. But that didn’t matter, for she

fell in love with his beauty. There was innocence and security in that adoration, but now there was nothing but chaos.

Chapter

16

He wanted her forgiveness most of all. Three years had passed since that episode, and yet time could not erase his memory of her baby blues swollen with anger and shame. That moment happened so fast. She didn't give him time to explain or apologize. It was only a diagnosis. She could always get a second opinion. He wanted her to know that he didn't think ill of her or her son, but she was too hot tempered to listen. She held on to her anger as if it were a purse full of money and prized jewels. Time did not soften her towards him, but rather with each passing year the bitterness grew worse. Dahlia was at a point now where she didn't even acknowledge his presence- not a wave, or a nod, or even a polite smile. She looked past him. Many a day she would be out in her yard, busy with her work, and he'd stop at the fence to bid her hello. He tried to strike up conversations with her about the weather or some other something, but it was as if he was talking to a wall. His wife would be out on the porch, standing with her hands on her hips and jealousy heavy in her eyes. She would call him home, and he of course obeyed, determined however to return to the yellow woman and vie for her forgiveness on some other occasion. Often he discussed the matter with his cousin, Miss Ruthie.

“Cos, I just don’t understand her.”

“Chile, you ain’t the first. She a closed off woman if I ever seed any. I’m bout the onliest one round here that tolerates her, save for Charletta and that boy of hern.”

“If you could of seen the way she stormed off. She acted like I had thrown something on her. I just don’t know. If she didn’t want my help then why did she bring the boy to me?”

“The truth scare folks. That’s somethin that ain’t never gone change.”

He let out a soft sigh, “Hummph, don’t I know that. I been spending the past few years of my life running from folks that can’t except the truth.”

Miss Ruthie looked at him with a quizzical expression on her face. His comment carried a weightiness that she could not quite put a finger on, although she suspected it had something to do with his name change. He didn’t bother elaborating. That part of his life was a private thing that no one save his wife, daughter, and the headhunters after him knew about. It was best kept that way, for it would cut down on the running.

It all started with a sick white woman. Some odd thing struck her down one day and never left her side. It marred her speech, and kept her body twitching at odd intervals. She came from old money, so her family spared no expense when it came to getting the best doctors to come see what they could do to repair the damage. Each had a different diagnosis, and prescribed her everything but the right thing. She was growing tired of taking pills and potions that left her more worse off than when she started. She remembered a good doctor she had seen once. He was colored. A little girl fell into convulsions right on the corner of Hummingbird Lane and Spear Avenue. Her mother was frantic and dropped all of her shopping bags on the hot sidewalk. Eggs rolled and

spattered everywhere. The concrete was so hot that day that some even scrambled. The woman looked wildly around for help. Someone went to a nearby store to call for an ambulance. Mrs. Bonaventure was sitting in the back seat of her Cadillac at the time, waiting for her driver to return with her package from the cleaners. She saw the whole episode from where she was sitting, and silently prayed for the little freckle-faced girl and her panic-stricken mother. There came about a colored man who offered his assistance. The woman didn't turn away his help. At such a critical time there was no room to worry about the color of someone's skin. Her little girl looked to be on her way from this world, and anyone who could help prevent that was welcomed to try. He knew just what to do. He asked someone if they could find him a blanket or some large item of clothing so that he could wrap the girl in. A man ran to the cleaners and was able to bring back a quilt. The colored man wrapped the girl securely in it and held her close to himself, rocking her and every now or so checking to see that she did not swallow her tongue. The girl calmed down considerably since the man's arrival. He seemed to have a magic touch. The ambulance soon came and the colored man explained to them in detail what he thought her condition to be. The girl's mother thanked the man, and they soon parted. He passed Mrs. Bonaventure's way, and she could not help but ask the man how he knew exactly what to do.

"That was fine work there, boy." She yelled out to him, "How'd you know to do all of that?"

Doctor O'Behr looked at the woman with disdain. He did not like how she called him a 'boy'. He was nobody's boy. He wanted nothing more than to walk off from her,

pretending not to hear her shrill voice, but to avoid a scene and being called even further out of his name, he stopped a moment and entertained her ignorance.

“I’m a doctor, Ma’am.”

She looked a bit amazed, for she had never heard of such, a colored doctor. Who did she think took care of colored people’s ailments? Did she think that they had no care? Perhaps they just let themselves get sick and die off, for they hadn’t any money in the first place.

“Is that so? Why I hadn’t any idea there was such.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Now if you don’t mind, I must be on my way.”

“Of course, don’t mind me. What’s your name, boy?”

The good doctor had to catch his tongue before he said anything to get himself into trouble. There were certain rules in the South that colored people had to be wary of. Talking smart to white folks, particularly white women, could get you into a world of trouble. He was already standing there too long as it was. The patrol cop on the other side of the street was growing more and more suspicious.

“The name’s Doctor Rubins, Ma’am.” That was his birth given name back then, before he had to change it several times to dodge headhunters, “If you don’t mind, I must be on my way.”

The woman nodded, and watched him descend down the pavement. His image resurrected in her mind as she lay in bed, waiting to die. He had a magical quality about him. She wanted him to come see her- wanted him to maybe work some magic on her, just as he did with that freckle-faced girl. She wrote his name down on a piece of paper and handed it to one of her daughters. The girl shared the information with her siblings,

and they together called around town in search of Doctor Rubins. To much disappointment, they could not find him.

“Mama, are you sure you have the name right? We’ve called every place in town and no one has even heard of this man.”

Mrs. Bonaventure mumbled as best she could, “Cuhlud.”

“What?” Her daughter asked.

“Culud, cuhlud, cuhlud.”

The girl still could not understand. “Here, Mama, write it down.”

The old woman weakly spelled out the word on paper. The girl looked shocked. She looked from the paper to her Mama several times for affirmation. She thought her eyes were playing tricks on her, either that or the illness was turning her Ma mad. She went out into the hall to discuss the matter with her siblings. Mrs. Bonaventure could not make out their whispers. They soon however came into the room.

Her dark-haired son looked at her, and searched her face for understanding, “Ma, is what Doris said true? You requesting a colored doctor to come look at you?”

The old woman nodded. Her yellowish-gray hair was splayed against the pillow like wildfire.

“Ma, do you know what you’re asking?” He asked again.

She nodded once more.

“This is unheard of.” He looked to his sisters, seeking their input. They had none. He would have to make the decision on his own. He blew a few breaths as he contemplated the matter. The sorrowful last-hope look in her gray eyes stirred him to submission.

“Alright, Ma. Alright. I’ll see what I can do to find him.”

He indeed found him, in a quaint little establishment on the colored side of town. Doctor Rubins was shocked by the request, and of course hesitant. But finally he agreed, though he would live to regret that decision.

When he approached the woman’s bedside, she grabbed hold of his hand as if he were some dear old friend. She mumbled, “Take the pain away, please.”

He looked into her desperate eyes, and was reminded of why he chose such an occupation. Her color did not matter now- a woman was crying out for help, and he would do his best to assist her. Things did not look so good though. Death was on her. Of course he did not tell her that, but relayed it to her children.

“She has a brain tumor.” This he determined from the slight disfiguration of her head, the tenderness of her scalp, and her own descriptions of her symptoms. But of course, her children were doubtful of his diagnosis. He didn’t know what he was talking about. None of the white doctors said anything close to his diagnosis. But they listened to him intently and nodded every now or so, sufficient enough to humor him.

“She doesn’t have much time. The only thing I can prescribe is some pain pills to dull the pain, but they won’t prevent the inevitable.”

They thanked him for his coming, and took the prescription for the pain pills. They had no intentions of filling it, and had in fact thrown the piece of paper into a wastebasket. But her pains were getting worse. She called out for the colored doctor. They did not want to bring him back. To quiet her they told her about the pain medication he prescribed for her. They had no choice then but to find the piece of paper to show her as proof. She made them call in the prescription to the local druggist while

in her presence. Days later the pills arrived. Her oldest daughter gave them to her. Her condition seemed to better. She had even gotten up from her sickbed. No, mind you it wasn't anything grand, for the length of the walk from her bed to the window was all of five feet, but it was an improvement. She was encouraged, as were her children. But she passed on a day or so after that. The family was devastated. After she was laid away, their thoughts started swirling. They were bitter. They missed their Ma. The colored doctor was responsible for her death, this they were convinced of. He gave a misdiagnosis, advised her to take the wrong medication, he had to pay for her death. He killed a white woman with his ignorance. This was unforgivable. In response he fled- he and his family in the deep of night. He had to reinvent himself each time the headhunters got too close. This not only involved changes in appearance, but changes in his name as well. He and his family were constantly on the move. If they were not running from headhunters they were fleeing from Klansmen, who could not muster the thought of colored folks like he and his wife pursuing white folks' professions. Their stay out West, in the all black township of Summnerville, was the longest they stayed anywhere without having to look over their shoulders. His wife resented the fact that he made them leave that place of comfort to return down South. Sometimes her husband's heart was too big for her liking. It was what got him into trouble most of the time. His big heart was what brought them back down South. He wanted to help the flood victims of '27. They were supposed to go back after his mercy trip, but something compelled him to stay. His wife had her doubts, and suspected it had to do with that crazy yellow girl who lived across the way- the one who was so bold as to steal her husband's kiss before she even knew his name. He assured her that she was never a factor. There was just a feeling he had about

Backwaters that necessitated he stay. He felt safe there, hidden. It was such a small place, it wasn't even listed on the state map, besides that it was the place where he had gotten his beginnings. He was tired of reinventing himself. So much change made him start questioning who he really was. That had to stop, and what better place to stop it than at home.

Backwaters hadn't changed a bit since he left. The same houses and faces were there, though altered a bit by the years, but still in tact and recognizable. He grew up in 1011, now occupied by the yellow blue-eyed girl and her son. He longed to revisit it. There were a handful of stories he could tell her about each room, but first he had to get on speaking terms with her. That seemed a task even harder than seeking the courtship of a girl who didn't even know you existed. But it was a challenge he was up for. She couldn't be that hard. Anyone that could passionately kiss a stranger as she did couldn't be. He would always remember the kiss. Her lips were as soft as rose petals, and the warmth they emitted was hotter than any wood burning stove. The fire of their touch made him think about his youth. He tried at best to convince his wife and himself that the kiss meant nothing, but more and more he found himself touching his lips in remembrance of the sting hers left. When her eyes opened, and she realized that he wasn't who she thought he was, it left him with an emptiness. In that moment a part of him wished that he could reinvent himself into that man she had envisioned, at least long enough to feel her warmth once more and the security of youth. The man she missed must have been special, even more, the love they shared must have been some kind of love. He wanted to know the story. Perhaps this is what kept him baying at her fence, hoping for recognition and forgiveness.

That day eventually came, and quite unexpectedly. She was out in her yard as usual, busy with her work. He was just coming from a death. Old Man Carter passed away, and he had to be there to record the official time of his passing. It was in the midst of spring. Magnolias were in bloom. The air was light and blue, and carried a newness or rebirth about itself. He inhaled the fresh air and savored over it as if it were some treasured thing. Each inhale made his lungs feel bigger, and filled him with a sweetness even thicker than that of sweetwater. He had just left the scene of a death, but walked out into a sea of air that reminded him of nothing else but life. It seemed in that moment nothing could break his spirit, no not even Miss Dahlia's cutting eyes. He stopped at her fence as usual. And as usual she ignored his presence. But something happened that particular day. It seemed an act of God, punishing her for her unforgiving nature. The pot that contained her laundering solution bubbled over unexpectedly. Her right hand could not move fast enough. She screamed. He came running. He led her to the pump, and immersed the injured hand in a flush of cold water. He took a nearby garment and wrapped her hand in it. His touch was soft to her. She felt safe and humbled.

"We'll get you some ointment to reduce the sting and scarring."

She only nodded. Her eyes however thanked him.

"You have to be more careful around hot things." He told her.

She wasn't in the mood for a lecture, for she was quite capable of taking care of herself. Besides, she was skilled in laundering. It was her occupation for some years now and she didn't need anybody telling her how to go about doing it. She kept quiet however only to avoid an argument.

He came to see her more frequently after that to rub medicine on the burn and re-wrap her bandages. It was his doctoral duty, or so he convinced his wife and Dahlia, though something else was stirring within, bringing him to her doorstep and into the house of his youth. The visits didn't stop, no not even after her hand had fully healed.

Chapter

17

As one might suspect, rumors started fluttering around about the doctor's frequent visits to 1011. His daily visits weren't much to pick at before, seeing how the woman Dahlia ignored his presence. But things had changed. She was talking to him now, and even more than that she let him past her fence, sometimes even into her house. Oh for shame. Didn't she have a conscience? Didn't she care about that man's wife who was just across the way and who could barge in on them at any moment? And what about her boy? How could she live with herself, exposing him to such harlotry? Dahlia's actions made a few folks a bit sympathetic towards Mrs. O'Behr, though they never told her to her face, because she was too stuck-up to approach. Others could care less, and thought she was getting her due.

But no one knew what they were talking about. The visits to 1011 were innocent. Dahlia and the good doctor developed a friendship. His presence often made her forget about the ache Elias left in her heart. And for him her presence and the house reminded him of his tender years. Though, there were times, when the space around them seemed to get tighter, the room would grow still, inner thoughts and wishes would get to swirling.

He would find himself softly touching his lips, remembering the sting hers left. For her, thoughts of Elias in the good doctor's presence seemed thinner than any ghost.

She would find herself lost in his face- that perfect sienna brown face, with no trace of age save for the crows feet about his eyes. Those eyes emitted a warmth that left her wanting. They were chocolate to the core and perfectly held her image. Then there was his moustache, that bushy pepper-speckled thing, it stung her when they shared that one kiss long ago. She had to fight a giggle every now and then from emerging, though she didn't do a very good job of it.

“What's so funny?”

She shook her head and cupped her hand over her mouth, in that cute way that women do when in the company of men.

“It's got to be something? What?”

“It's nothing really.” Her face was lit up like a schoolgirl's. She seemed more alive in his presence than in anyone else's. He liked the glow he put there.

“It's your moustache.” She finally admitted, “I remember how it felt when, you know.”

A grin surfaced on his face. His teeth were as white as milk, “Oh so you making fun of an old man, huh?”

She laughed all the harder. It felt good to laugh, for God only knew how many rivers she cried in times past. The doctor made her feel younger than she really was. She was now twenty-nine, nearing thirty, but he made her feel like she was seventeen again.

In that moment of laughter the space in that kitchen grew tighter, so tight that they felt like they were on top of each other. A stillness grew. Their eyes became heavy and

lost. It seemed like they were moving closer to one another by some outside force that seemed stronger than a magnet. They were close enough to feel and taste one another's breath. Their breath danced like warm whispers against each other's flesh. His hands found their way to the small of her back. She pressed closer, and found herself caressing the ruggedness of his face where a beard was trying to surface. Their hearts thudded outside of themselves, almost touching but not quite. A moment almost happened, yes almost, but a violent storm came into the room and broke the melody brewing. It was Acanthus. He was a boy of thirteen now, growing with every breath. He didn't like the doctor coming there, trying to steal his Mama's heart.

He slammed a package of raw meat on the table, so hard that blood started seeping from the white packaging. The two jumped, as if they felt a bullet shoot through them. A look of fear crossed both of their faces. They felt like two teenagers caught in the act by an angry parent. They pushed themselves apart.

"There's your meat." The young boy growled.

"Canthus where are your manners? We got company."

"He ain't none of my company."

"Boy, you watch yourself, hear? You ain't got too old where I can't put you cross my knee, yeah."

Acanthus looked into his Ma's eyes and softened. She always had that affect on him. He could do her no wrong, for he loved her more than he loved himself, but he wasn't about to share her with anyone else. His long gone father had taken enough of her attention. If someone else came into the picture, surely she would forget about him all together. He looked to the doctor, with a fire in his eyes, as if to say "Get Out!".

Doctor O'Behr picked up on the boy's cue. He wasn't mad. He understood, for he too had a Mother once and was just as protective of her, "Miss Dahlia, I'm gonna talk with you some other time. I best be on my way. I have a few rounds I need to make anyway."

"Yes, of course, let me walk you out." She grabbed him by the elbow, and escorted him to the back porch. She looked back at her son with cutting eyes. He looked at her briefly, shook his head and sat himself at the table.

On the porch their eyes did most of the speaking. Hers apologized, his said there was nothing to apologize about. He touched the full of her cheek softly- a gentle touch, softer than any feather. Her midnight blues left him aching, his muddy browns left her wanting. Maybe time and circumstance would bring them another almost moment, maybe. He descended the steps, not failing to look behind. She watched him from the edge of the porch until he disappeared completely from eyesight. Something kept her standing there though, a moment too long for Acanthus' liking. He came to the screen door, and propped it open just a bit.

"Mama, I'm sorry. I just don't like him hanging around here." He could not resist coming out onto the porch, and hugging his Ma from behind. There was still a little boy deep inside the appearance of a man. He loved to be drunken by the olive scent of her hair. She was still mad though- tired of his apologies. He was too hot tempered. She tried peeling his hands off of her, but he was much stronger.

"Mama please, I'm sorry. Please, Mama." He held on tighter. There were tears in his voice. She continued to try and release herself from his trap.

"Canthus, let me go!" She hollered.

Reluctantly his grip loosened. He loved her too much to hurt her, or so he thought. But he did hurt her. He walked in on her almost moment, a moment she thought would free her from all remembrances of his father. She had finally come to terms that he was not coming back. He haunted her mind still though, only now anger was attached to his memory. She needed to let go of the anger. The only way to do that was to let new love in, but Acanthus was making sure that this wasn't going to be. He made her feel trapped. She didn't like feeling that way. Her own Maman tried such a task and didn't succeed. What made this boy of thirteen, not even a man yet, think he was going to accomplish the inevitable?

Once free from his embrace, she stormed off to go prepare supper. Tears filled his eyes, but he would not let them fall. He went into a fit of rage, and kicked everything off the porch. Dahlia softly closed and locked the door until his temper subsided. He went off into the evening to gather his thoughts. Somehow his feet always brought him to the steps of Precious Dolby's house. She was easy to talk to. But on this particular evening something, or rather someone stopped him along the way. It was Ma Sabine. She was just coming out of Pap's with an armful of groceries. His passing by made her take attention. He was carrying more than just himself.

"Let me lift that curse from you, boy."

He almost didn't turn around. He almost walked off because he didn't think she was addressing him, but then she said it again and he could feel her eyes looking through him. He had to stop and turn

Her face was emotionless, round, shiny, and as black as an iron pot, if not blacker.

“Yeah boy, I’m talking to you. Let me lift that curse- end that misery ‘fore it get you into trouble, yeah.”

He just looked at her. His tongue was too heavy to move.

“Come boy, let me lift it.” She descended the steps of the establishment like a floating shadow. Her eyes never left his. “Things be better between you and her. Come.”

But he did not come. There was fear in his face, like he had seen some ungodly apparition. He shook his head and fled, never looking behind. By the time he reached Precious’ steps, his legs felt like jelly. He barely made it past step one, and made such a ruckus that Precious came running out half dressed.

“Good Lawd, boy, what’s wrong with you?” She quickly wrapped her robe about her, secured it loosely, and helped him up the remainder of the steps. He was still speechless and the fear had not left his face. With a trembling finger he pointed towards Pap’s. Ma Sabine was still standing there, eyes still intent on the boy. The image stirred a stutter in Precious’ own speech.

“CCCCCome on in hheerre....CCCCome on.”

They went into the house and sat on the edge of her bed. Silence kept each of them for a while. Precious wondered if Ma Sabine told Acanthus the secret. And if so, why? Wasn’t she breaking some code of silence that wasn’t supposed to be broken in her line of profession? A priest never discusses confessed sins, nor a psychiatrist his patient’s records. The same had to be true of folks in Ma Sabine’s line of work, telling secrets was just bad business. Didn’t she know that? Perhaps she did and just didn’t care. Precious pulled Acanthus close to her and rocked him. He was still trembling. She was sorry now that she never gained enough courage to tell the boy the secret with

her own lips. After that day Dahlia came and interrupted their private meeting, she lost all strength to spill the words out. She had taken the interruption as a sign from God that He did not want her to tell the boy anything. It did not take much to convince her, but the boy kept visiting her all the more after that. No, he was never so bold as to ask her what she was trying to tell him back then, but rather he visited her everyday in anticipation that they would have another one of those quiet moments, and she would reveal all. He didn't care how long it took for the subject to arise again, he could wait.

“What did she say to you?” She finally asked. She needed to be sure.

His speech came back to him. He answered with a cracked voice, “She said I had a curse on me. I didn't like the way she looked at me.” He pressed his head closer to Precious' warm bosom. Her warmth made him feel safe.

“What else?”

“She wanted me to come with her. Said she could make things better. She scared me. It was like she knew everything about me.”

Precious felt a bit relieved that the secret was still safe, but old worries and guilt crept back in, “You stay away from that woman. She don't mean you no good, hear?”

Acanthus nodded.

“Why you out this time of evening anyhow? You gone have your Ma out combing the street for you.”

“I doubt that. We got into it.”

“Over what this time?”

“That doctor.”

“What he got to do wit anything?” She asked with a cocked brow.

“Trying to come in between us.”

She hugged him to herself, “Aw, you ain’t got nothing to worry about. The doctor’s devoted to his wife. The hell if I know why, but he is.”

“How you know?”

“You all in grown folks business.” She cracked a devious smile, “I know cause I offered him some and he turned me away. Now that can only mean two things. He either gay or devoted. And from the way he packaged and carries that package, ain’t no way in the world he swing the other way. Precious knows. I done seen plenty and had plenty.”

She burst into wicked laughter. Her laugh was contagious. Acanthus couldn’t help but join her, even though he didn’t fully comprehend what he was laughing at. But the laughter felt good. It made him forget about the fear that just jumped on him.

Chapter 18

He wanted a radio most of all, so that he could hear the baseball games. A part of him hoped that by chance he would hear something about the baseball player he met three years back at the train station. Sometimes he would eavesdrop on the men's conversations on Pap Mirro's storefront while waiting for his Ma, hoping that the man's name would surface. The men's conversations were always predictable. Talk stirred in four paths: wars, women, money, and sports- in no particular order mind you, but rest assured the evening would not pass without someone touching base on all four.

Sometimes Josh Gibson's name would surface, and Acanthus' ears would perk up. Just recitation of the name stirred him with inspiration. The man believed in him when no one else would, and for that he would always be grateful. His swing was the best ever now. In his mind he could put anyone to shame, but no one ever knew this. He kept his talent hidden. Only the imaginary crowd of people he created at Winbush Hills, under countless dusk skies, knew of his progress. He was still too shy to show the world what he had. Perhaps he feared that they would somehow take and twist it into something ugly. Folks have a way of diminishing your dreams, of cutting your pride, of making you

question what you once treasured. He wasn't ready for the world to do that to him yet. He wanted to wait until his dream was stronger than the world, and then he would show them. Until then it was his private thing that gave him the will to rise each morning.

He would ask his Ma for that radio. It could be his birthday gift. She would have to buy it for him because he hardly ever asked her for anything. One evening, he got the nerve to ask her. She was out on the front porch, resting the day's nerves away. Every now and then her eyes drifted across the way to 1012, where the good doctor lived. Acanthus sat and joined her. He took her feet into his lap, and rubbed them just right.

"Ooh cher, that feel some good. What you want?"

He looked at her with slick eyes. The falling sun danced in them like small licks of flames, "What make you think I want something?"

"Cause I know you. You either broke something or want something? Now which is it?"

He smiled, though he took a bit of offense to what she said. He was always doing for her and never asked for anything in return. What he did, he did out of love not obligation. What hurt most of all was that she didn't even realize this.

"Well, my birthday's coming up soon. I just wanted to spare you the trouble of trying to figure out what to get me."

"What is it, 'Canthus?" She said with a bit of disinterest in her voice.

"A radio." He watched her eyes for a reaction, hoping for a good one.

She turned the thought over in her mind for a moment, "Now what you gonna do with a radio? You can't even two step."

"I have my reasons."

She thought some more. A smile lit her face. Maybe a radio in the house wasn't such a bad idea. It surely would bring life into that place, plus cure a bit of the loneliness. Who knows, maybe she could even teach the boy the two step. He was afterall getting of courting age.

"Alright. We'll get you one."

He kissed her cheek gently. It was warm from the evening sun.

"Thank you, Mama."

"You best rub my feet some more before I change my mind." She teased.

He recommenced the rubbing.

"I know just the right one. I been looking at that one Mister Pap got in the back. It won't cost us too much, nor take up too much space. We can sit it right in the parlor in front of that empty space by the window."

"I see you been thinking hard on this. I wished you'd apply as much attention to your lessons."

"Aw Ma, you just a hard grader is all."

"How else you gonna learn? If everything was made easy for you, you wouldn't have no reason to live or want anything out of life."

He could do nothing but nod in agreement. As of late he was doing a lot of wanting. He wanted that radio, he wanted fame, and as of late he wanted that girl across the way, the good doctor's daughter, Sojourner. He didn't know how that had come to pass. It wasn't surely something he planned. For years he made her invisible to himself- not only her, but all girls. Therese was responsible for his mistrust of the female sex. She left a sting that took years and then some to heal. He still was not fully there, but some

inner urging stronger than himself planted in the want.

It was a day like any other day. His Ma had arisen and fixed him breakfast. He washed himself, ate, and cleaned the kitchen afterwards. Then he and his Ma reviewed the previous day's lessons. Dreaming was still heavy in his eyes. He looked out of the window, as his Ma discussed his English lesson. They were reading Hamlet that week, and she was discussing Ophelia, but his mind was elsewhere. At first his eyes intently studied a mother bird feeding her young, but then a vision took his heart's attention. There on the steps of 1012 sat a girl, lovelier than any he had ever seen. Her name was Sojourner. She was flipping through some women's magazine. She took his breath, made his heart pause a bit too long before its next beat. It was as if he was seeing her for the very first time, though that had not been the case. She brought him breakfast once, and something to wash it down with- all with a smile. Yes, she was the very same girl, but there was something different about her now, or perhaps something different about him that made him see her in a different way. She lit up his life like there had never been a ray of sun or streak of lightening to have ever grazed it. He could write a volume about her eyes alone. They were as brown as earth, as soft as dusk, and filled with a heavy helping of whatever that secret thing is that makes men's knees buckle and hearts bend in foolish submission. He could get lost in a face like hers, and never bother finding his way out. Hers was a face that could turn brother against brother- friend against friend. He was still too young to know about this new swirling in his heart, but from what he could gather or imagine is that these types of feelings must have set the spark to his mother's madness over his father.

“‘Canthus?...’Canthus? Boy, am I gonna have to close that window to get your attention?” She rose and pulled down the blind, not bothering once to peer out and see what had him so lost, “You need to focus on your lessons.” She sat back down, “Now, as I was asking you, ‘What makes Ophelia such a tragic figure?’”

Acanthus was still out of it. Though the blinds were closed his thoughts were still with the vision across the way. He didn’t care about Ophelia, for she was not a real person, only a figment invented in someone’s mind ages ago. His thoughts rested on the touchable. And right then the touchable was Sojourner.

“Boy, am I gonna have to pour some hot water on you to get your attention?”

He remained silent and in a trance.

“That’s it. No afternoon break for you. You can forget that. Now while I’m out making my rounds. You begin re-reading Act One, and you gonna have a quiz.” She snapped her finger. Finally he returned.

“What, Mama?”

“I SAID RE-READ ACT ONE WHILE I’M OUT. YOU GONNA HAVE A QUIZ.” There was a bit of anger in her voice. It was not like him to drift off from her like that.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He quickly buried himself in the book to redeem himself.

“‘Canthus?’”

“Yes, Mama?”

“Don’t you think it’d be much easier to read it, if you had the book right side up?”

Acanthus looked down at the book once more, now with embarrassment. He turned it right side up. She threw him a questioning eye as she walked off to begin her day's work.

Chapter 19

The radio brought life into 1011. Dahlia took the boy's suggestion and sat the mahogany arched life box in front of the empty window in the parlor. She seemed more attached to it than he. It was the first thing she listened to in the morning, and the last thing she listened to at night. She liked listening to the soap operas most of all, with their tragic heroines and heartbreaking men. Sometimes Charletta Mae would come over and listen to them with her. They would press and fold laundry together. She was a budding girl of seventeen then, fattened by heartache and marred by skin lighteners that didn't live up to their promise. Listening to the soap operas was her escape-her chance to listen in on the lives of seemingly perfect people who were on the verge of resolving their problems within the course of an hour, or in some cases a half hour. During the shows she and Dahlia kept quiet, so as to not miss a single word. They reserved their discussions for afterwards. Sometimes Charletta Mae couldn't help but drift a bit. She would look over at Acanthus, who was nestled in a corner of the parlor, trying at best to concentrate on reading or studying. The radio was not a disturbance for him, because it was turned down low during his study sessions. But often he found himself drifting from

his studies for some other reason. His mind could not shake Sojourner off. He would catch himself in a trance, watching and anticipating the moment when she would come outside. Charletta knew what he was watching for, and it hurt her deeply. He had finally developed an interest in girls, but sadly he still did not see her. Perhaps if she had kept her figure she could have had a chance. But now there was no chance. He only saw her as a big sister, not someone he could love forever and then some. Sometimes, the tears were so thick in her eyes that Dahlia wondered if she was getting too attached to the soap operas.

“Maybe we should listen to something else for a few days.” Dahlia suggested on one occasion. That day she had to forget about the steamy storyline and break the silence.

Charletta Mae quickly wiped her eyes with the hem of her dress before Acanthus took notice, “Oh no, Miss Dahlia. I just cries easy. Don’t mind me. It’s amazing how you can get so attached to these folks. Sometimes it feels like I’m a part of their lives, watching and listening to them go through the heartache, but can’t do nothing about it. It makes me sad a bit.”

“Well, it helps me to remind myself that they aren’t real. They’re just characters-false inventions created by someone that’s bored. Maybe if you look at it that way, it’ll stop some of the tears.”

Charletta could do nothing but plant a false smile on her face. If only Miss Dahlia knew that she was crying real tears for a real boy, her boy, “I suppose you right, Miss Dahlia. Maybe I ought to start thinking of it like that. It could do me some good too to

maybe take a break from 'em . It can't hurt. 'Sides my Auntie's been hassling me to get a job. She says I waste too much time."

"A job will come. You can be certain of that. But don't worry too much on that. You got youth, and if I were you I wouldn't waste it. It'll get away from you before you know it."

"Yes, Ma'am. I know." She looked over at Acanthus a spell. But his eyes were fixed elsewhere. She knew what it felt like to watch and wait. She wished she could tell him that it was fruitless, but that would be something he'd have to learn on his own.

"Aunt Ruthie tell me you might be getting hitched soon." Dahlia commented as she pressed a blouse. The steam felt good against her face, and reddened it just a bit.

"Yes, Ma'am." Charletta replied with disinterest, eyes still fixed on the boy.

"So, who is the lucky fellow?"

"Nobody special- Carlus Myers. He work down at the sugar mill."

"Y'all been courting long?"

"Not really. Auntie had him over to the house a few nights for supper, and we go to church sometimes together. I wouldn't really call it courting. Then one day Auntie told me he asked for my hand. I don't love 'em. But she said I had to marry 'em. Said I'm getting too old to be by my lonesome. "

"My Maman tried to do the same thing with me when I was your age. She was so desperate that she wanted me to marry my own brother."

"Your own brother? What kinda Mama is she?" Charletta said with alarm but quickly thereafter tried amending her statement, in fear that she had offended her friend,

"I mean, what was she thinking?"

“Don’t know. I mean he wasn’t my full blood brother. We had different Mamas, but still the thought of it troubled me. That’s why I left that place. They had a lot of that going around- folks marrying kin to keep the bloodlines pure.”

“How’d your brother take it?”

“He was as much upset by it than myself.” She felt a chill crawl up her spine like the fingers of a ghost, even though steam was grabbing at her face. Resurrected memories always had that affect on her.

“You ever hear from him?”

Dahlia thought a moment then shook her head. She couldn’t recall a time that Ambrose had crossed the tracks to come see her. He despised Backwaters as much as she despised Lafitte. The boys in Backwaters always picked fights with him, so he stayed as far away from them as possible.

When Dahlia first moved across the tracks, Ambrose used to write her letters. But the letters stopped after two years or so. She didn’t know why. The letters left him with an emptiness. There was no intimacy there. The written word wasn’t like a live being. You couldn’t look into the eyes of words or feel their embrace. Reading her letters always made him feel cold and distant. Memories of her were far warmer. So he stopped writing and lived on the memories.

“You miss him?”

“Yeah, I miss’em plenty.” She got lost a bit, so lost that she almost burned the garment she was pressing.

“Watch the iron, Miss Dahlia!”

Dahlia quickly lifted the iron from the blouse in time enough to save it and her hide. She put the iron back on its stand, “How did we get on that subject anyhow? If I can recall, we were talking about you and your soon-to-be marriage.”

“I’d rather not talk about that anyway. It ain’t something I want, at least not with him. He only marrying me out of convenience anyway. He need somebody to cook and clean for him, and when the time right come birth him some babies. That ain’t what I call love.”

“No, it ain’t, but you don’t have to go through with it, you know?”

“That’s easy for somebody like you to say. When you look like me you have to take what you can get.”

“You too hard on yourself, Charletta. You got lovely eyes, and the nicest smile, plus you good company. You gotta start thinking better of yourself. If you don’t know one else will.”

Charletta nodded, but she did not agree. Some people were just born lucky, and she just happened to not be one of them. She accepted her lot. It was time for the fight to end. There would be no more bleaching creams, no more wishing for baby doll hair, and an hourglass figure. It was time to settle for what God dished out to her. How could she fight God and live to tell about it? It was no use.

Dahlia fell quiet. The moment had grown too sour for words. She continued pressing and Charletta resumed folding. They would wait for the next show in silence.

A warm August afternoon brought a resurrected spirit to the door of 1011. Dahlia was in the kitchen, preparing a meal of butter beans and rice for Acanthus, when she heard the insistent knock. She wiped her hands on her apron and nudged a wisp of loose hair into her fuzzy ponytail.

“Canthus, get that for me. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Acanthus left his division problem and went to the door. A short pretty man stood there, slim frame and all. The largest part of him was his broad shoulders. His hair was slicked back and waved up. Through the screen, Acanthus could see a beauty mark just below and to the left of his left eye. The eyes that looked back at him looked much like his own. He remembered seeing them a ways back when he crossed the creek to go scavenge for food during the flood.

“Where’s your Ma, boy?” The man asked with a sugarcoated voice.

“In the kitchen. Can I help you?” Acanthus was a much taller than the man and had to look down on him. He looked to be a well-to-do gentleman. He wore a band-collared, mustard colored shirt that seemed to choke him, an olive vest, and slacks to match. The shoes on his feet looked like those of a rich man’s. Acanthus had seen plenty pairs like his in the window of Rosenstein’s Department store, they were too fancy for his tastes.

“Is that anyway to greet kin?” The yellow man asked, “Boy, open this here door ‘fore I tan your hide.” He said jokingly. Just then Dahlia had come into the room. From afar she could not recognize the visitor, but as she got closer his identity became clearer.

She found herself running towards the man. She was so caught up in the moment that she couldn't recollect how she gathered and wrapped herself about his slight frame. Acanthus held a bit of jealousy in his eyes. The man swung her around, and they made a ruckus of noise that stirred the neighbors.. They onlooked with bold questioning eyes. Humph, another one of her lovers, they suspected.

“Oh Ambrose. How good to see you, cher.” She said as she dismantled herself from him. Her hands however could not tear themselves from his petal-soft face, “Oh, look at you. All grown.”

“And look at you, domesticated, but still the same ole pretty Dahlia. You can make anything look en vogue.”

“Oh stop. These my working clothes. I still got stepping out clothes.” She smiled, and looked at him with those enchanting baby blues. They still could whip a spell on him. A gentle smile lifted his cheeks and revealed a set of dimples. She playfully picked them from his face, “I thought I stole these from you long ago.”

“They had a way of coming back to me, I guess.”

“Come in, sit a spell.” She laced her arm inside of his, and escorted him in, not however before throwing a smart eye to the onlookers.

“Ambrose, this is my son Acanthus. ‘Canthus, this is your Uncle Ambrose.”

Ambrose sized up the boy with one glance, “Yes, I know. We’ve met.”

Dahlia looked from her son to Ambrose and then again, “Have you?”

Acanthus tried to tell the man with his eyes to not elaborate, but the man did not understand, or either did not care.

“Why yes, back in the flood. He came over one morning asking for food. I thought you knew.”

Now Ambrose searched the boy’s face for an answer, but the boy looked away with a bit of anger in his eyes.

Dahlia frowned, “I had no idea. ‘Canthus knows I forbade him to go cross those tracks.” She looked to Acanthus for an explanation, but he provided none. He went to the corner to finish his division problem, but could feel her eyes burning through him. He would have hell to answer to when the visitor left.

Ambrose felt the tension and sought to relieve it since he was to blame for it, “It wasn’t anything really, chere. He came to get food for you. He said you were very ill.”

Dahlia’s face eased a bit, “Yes, yes of course I was. I can’t even remember half of it, but enough about that. Come sit, and tell me what blew you in.”

They sat on the burgundy sofa, flanked with embroidered pillows. It was plush and comforting- one that could easily lull you into a deep sleep in the heat of day if you weren’t too careful.

“Well, I’m getting married, and I want you to come to the wedding.” His words carried an unknown weight. And his eyes did not reflect the glimmer of one soon to be married.

“Looks like marriage is getting as contagious as small pox.” She clasped her hands about her knees in nervousness. The news cut her breath. She was more surprised than anything, for she could never imagine him as married. It seemed too brave a venture for him to take. She smiled uneasily, and tried to read his face, “I suppose congratulations is due.”

He cocked his head a bit, and rubbed his chin. The gold rings on his fingers threw dancing sparkles on the wall. She was a hard one to figure out. He thought she would be more enthused.

“Yes, I suppose congratulations is due.” He blew under a heavy breath, and leaned forward to rest his elbows lazily on his thighs.

“Aunt Ruthie’s niece, Charletta Mae, is getting married too.” Dahlia added.

“You didn’t answer my question, Dahlia, are you coming?” He didn’t look at her. He was a bit upset that she was avoiding the question. This was clear because he never called her Dahlia unless he was disturbed.

She blew a breath, a sigh almost. She didn’t want to break her vow and go back to that place. There were too many memories there, and besides that he didn’t seem happy about things.

“Who is she, cher? Do I know her?”

“Her name is Dalphese Dupre. And no you don’t know her, she come from Isle Breveille, up in nord Louisiane.” He now faced her. His eyes looked deep into hers. He wanted an answer, “Now you coming or not?” His words were laced with anger. A part of him was mad that she left him all those years ago, and now here he was, coming to a place that he despised to beg for her support. He was ready to forgive her for all those missed years if she just bent a bit. Why did she always have to be so strong willed? Didn’t she miss him like he missed her? Was the love still there, or had that gone too when she crossed those tracks and moved into enemy territory?

“Ambrose.” She spoke slowly, as if rehearsing the words in her mind first then replaying them aloud, “You know my feelings about that place... You know me and

Maman don't see eye to eye on anything... We would make a miserable day of what's supposed to be one of the happiest days of your life...I..."

"Dahlia, you're not coming for her. You're coming for me. What's the matter with you? I thought you cared about me."

" 'Care?' 'Care' don't even come close to what I feel for you, cher. How you gonna sum up what we have in 'Care'?" She moved closer to him, and gathered his well-manicured hands into her own. Hers felt rougher in comparison, "Ambrose, you know I love you. How could you ever question that?"

"Why'd you stay away from me like that?" He peeled her hands off of his, "You knew I couldn't handle her by myself."

"Cher, you know I didn't leave you. I left her and that place, but never you. I wrote. Even after you stopped responding I wrote. I didn't know what happened. I thought maybe she had gotten a hold to the letters and kept them from you- I thought too that maybe you left."

"You could have come seen me every now or so, even if it was just on a holiday." He arose and drifted to a near by window. His visit was more emotional than he anticipated. Maybe he made a mistake coming there all together, but something seemed to draw him there- something outside of himself. It tortured him in his sleeping and in his waking. He had to satisfy it, lest it haunt him the rest of his life.

"If it means that much to you, then I'll come."

Acanthus' head juttred up. His Ma was saying the unthinkable. He looked at her. She was not looking at the man or at him, but staring at the floor. She looked like a broken doll, similar to the way she looked when her sleeping episodes hit. He wanted

nothing more than to run to her and lift her head and save her from the visitor that was making her swallow her pride. Who was he anyway, for her to stoop down so low? In that moment he hated him even though he didn't know him.

"You don't have to go nowhere you don't wanna go, Mama." He yelled out. His voice was hard and cut through the air with no mercy.

"It's alright, 'Canthus." Silently she prayed to God that he wouldn't break out into one of his angry spells.

"Who are you to tell my Mama what to do?" He stood up, eyes intent on the estranged visitor.

Ambrose just looked at the boy blankly. He didn't want to start anything. He just came to see his sister. What was it about Backwaters that made everyone who lived there so angry?, he wondered.

Acanthus' temperature was steady rising, fueled by the thought that she would have the audacity to cross the tracks to go see the stranger married off, yet didn't bother crossing them to rescue him when he was at death's door.

"Mama, you're not going are you?"

"Canthus, please, we don't need a scene. Mama knows what she's doing." She arose. She figured if she stood between he and Ambrose a fight would not brew.

"How could you, Mama? How could you, when you didn't even cross those tracks for me?" He cried out.

"Baby, I did come for you."

“No you didn’t. They had to bring me to you, Mama. I waited for you too. I waited all that time and you never came. And now you gonna cross those tracks for him? What more is he to you than me?”

Things were escalating. It was a room suffocating with pain, and Dahlia was in the middle of it all.

“I was on my way there, ‘Canthus. I was on the verge of crossing when your Auntie Camellia came rushing through. I was on my way, don’t that count for anything? I was on my way.”

“But it wasn’t soon enough, Mama- it wasn’t soon enough!” Tears were hot rolling down his face. It looked odd to see someone so brutish crying, Ambrose thought to himself.

“It looks like I started trouble. I didn’t mean for all this to come. I best be on my way.” He moved towards the door. Dahlia quickly pulled him back.

“No, stay. Stay for supper. We have a lot of catching up to do. Please. Everything will be alright.”

He could not resist her even if he tried.

“Alright. I’ll stay a little while.” He looked to Acanthus as if to ask permission. “That is if it’s okay with Acanthus.”

Acanthus was on fire by now. He could care less if the stranger stayed or left. His Ma had chosen someone else over him yet again. When would she ever stop? He slung his desk and chair across the room. Paper and ink spilled everywhere. His heart exploded.

“THE HELL IF I CARE!!!” Then he stormed off in the heat of day, to seek the comfort of understanding arms.

Dahlia was filled with fear and embarrassment. Her right hand seemed permanently pressed to her heart. Ambrose just stood still. He was sorry that he had come.

He loved her too hard. It was suffocating. She didn't like being contained, so when he ran out the door she didn't follow. She was too afraid. He wasn't the same little boy she once knew. Of course, he still worshiped her in every way he could, from stroking her hair, to rubbing her feet, to cleaning the house and then some; but there was something different about him. Whenever he even thought someone else was getting too close to her, he made them go away. It was more like he was a jealous lover than her son. She felt guilty for the way he was turning out, and thought perhaps it was something that she had done or didn't do. Elias had left, and she was so young when she had the boy, motherhood didn't come so easily for her. Perhaps it would have if his father hadn't left. But she was so tired of thinking of “could've’s”.

“I just don't know what to do with him, cher.”

She and Ambrose were still standing. The screendoor was wide open. Every now and then a breeze would rattle the papers. Dahlia finally took hold of herself, and went into the kitchen to get a rag to wipe up the spilled ink. Ambrose stood the chair and desk back up, and gathered the papers.

“I feel so bad. Seem like it's all my fault.”

“T’ain’t your fault. That’s been trouble brewing fore your visit.”

“Maybe he miss his Pa.”

“Maybe.” Dahlia shook her head, and scrubbed the floor harder. She prayed that the ink would not set, “But that can’t be helped. Elias long gone.”

“You know, I always thought it strange the way he left. It didn’t seem natural. Y’all two were as close as the Trinity.”

“Yeah, I thought so too.” His comment got her thoughts to churning. She always thought that their argument and his leaving was strange, but to hear that someone else thought so too made her start rethinking the events of that day.

“I don’t care how heated an argument y’all must’ve had, it couldn’t have been that bad to send him off forever. I mean I could see a few days, but not a lifetime. Especially since y’all never had words to that degree before.” Ambrose shook his head the more he talked about it, “Naw, chere, that definitely was not natural.”

“What you thinking?” Her head popped up. The smell of the ink was fighting with the spiciness of Ambrose’s cologne. She lifted her head in hopes that a summer breeze would wash the smells away.

“You have any enemies?”

“Not that I know of, but I know Maman didn’t like me with him. I have no doubt in my mind that she had a part in his going away. Now whether it’s directly or indirectly, I can’t say, but she’s part to blame.”

“You never looked into it?”

“What’s the use? Too many years have gone by to turn back time now. I’ve moved on. Ain’t no need for digging up graves. I’m tired of ghosts.”

The room grew still. Dahlia concentrated on removing the ink spot, and Ambrose tried to make some order out of the paper he gathered.

“You love this ‘Moiselle Dupre, cher?’”

“What make you ask that?”

“What make me not ask it? You getting married, aren’t you? Love should be a part of that, don’t you think?”

Ambrose closed the screendoor, and resumed a seat on the sofa. He should have known that Dahlia would pry, “Yes, I love her.”

Dahlia looked up to study his face. She saw everything but love there, “Then how come I don’t believe you?” She returned her attention to the ink spot.

He pulled a toothpick from the depth of his pocket and commenced cleaning his nails with precision, “Perhaps, because you a devil’s advocate. You don’t believe nothing till it’s spelt out as clear as day.”

“Then spell it out. How’d you meet?”

“That’s not important.”

“That don’t sound like a man in love.” She waited for a response but got none, “I bet Maman is forcing you to do this, isn’t she? Doesn’t she have a life of her own? Why she gotta fool with everybody else’s?”

“I’m marrying her because I want to. It’s time. I’m not getting any younger and neither or you.”

“I’m fine by my lonesome. It grows on you after a while. Besides, you think that boy gonna let somebody else come up in here?”

“You can’t let him take your life away, chere. You need more than work and motherhood.”

“Now ain’t that the pot calling the kettle black. You letting her drain your life away, and ain’t saying a word about it. Marriage ain’t gonna make you whole, if that’s what you thinking. That have to come way fore then.”

Ambrose turned her words over in his mind. She was right, but he was powerless. He was never whole, and doubted that he would ever feel that way. He was split apart. There was a part of him that blood kin did not even know about, let alone the world. He couldn’t let outsiders know what was within. They would never understand why he enjoyed the company of a man over that of a woman. He knew of a few men who were lynched for such revelations- white and black alike. He’d rather life over death any day.. No one could be trusted with his secret, no not even the one woman he loved most of all, his Dahlia. He would live a masquerade if he had to, life was just that precious to him. Besides, he would always have his hidden moments. The world could never snatch those from him. This was the only thing that gave him solace about the whole marriage ordeal.

“Why so quiet, cher?” She looked up to study his face some more. Sweat crawled from her forehead to her brow. She wiped it away with the back of her hand. A trace of ink smeared where she wiped. Ambrose smiled because she looked so child-like crouched there on the floor. The image was a precious one. He drew up his pant legs and squatted beside her to wipe the smear away.

“Let me get that off of you. You always getting yourself into a mess.”

“You know me. But stop trying to get off the subject. We were discussing your marriage. Now when is this big-to-do anyway?”

Ambrose nestled himself on the floor beside her, “Enough about me. I wanna hear about you.”

Acanthus could not run to the arms of Precious Dolby after his tantrum. She was still at work. In the heat of the moment he forgot this, and knocked on her door anyway. After a few knocks he felt stupid, and quickly left. He was in the process of retracing his steps and returning home, even though he was still full of fire. He considered going to see Charletta Mae, but she had company. She was out on the porch with her soon-to-be-husband, and did not seem like she wanted to be bothered. He felt alone. He needed someone to fill the void. He thought of that pretty girl who lived across the way at 1012. Her Ma guarded her like a bear. But something drew him to their door. He supposed it was the fire brewing within him that gave him the courage.

Mrs. O’Behr answered the door with a frown. Her expression grew all the more sour when she realized the visitor was that yellow gal’s boy.

“Yes, may I help you?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I come to see your daughter.” Acanthus said nervously. The sternness of the woman seemed to beat the fire out of him.

“My daughter is not receiving any visitors, young man. And even if she were you would not be welcomed. Now if you will excuse me.” With that she closed the door before he could respond. He walked away sadly, but vowed to return. He looked back as he walked away. The girl stood in the window. She slowly raised her hand and waved.

Acanthus stopped his tracks on the pebble-paved walkway and waved back. The white lace curtains framed her as if she were an angel in a box. It was a vision that tugged at his heart, and gave him all the more encouragement to return someday.

Chapter

20

He listened to the baseball games in vain. Never once did he hear Josh Gibson's name mentioned- no, not even in passing. He thought this was strange, or that maybe he was listening in at the wrong times. But this did not kill his spirit or growing love for the game, though it was still a mystery. He had to find out why, and who better to ask than the men out on Pap Mirro's storefront? It was one evening after Sarpy dropped off the last load of workers. The men had gone to sit out on the porch to drink beer, and forget about the day that was leaving and the one that was set to come. Acanthus had been sitting there waiting for them, all the while twirling and fumbling with the heirloom Mr. Gibson had given him. This was the very first time that he ever brought the signed baseball cap out into public. He wanted to show the men that he had proof that such a man existed, if they began to question the authenticity of his story. The man's signature was all the proof they would need.

He waited until they settled in good before pestering them. His cue was when Mr. Palmer leaned way back into the old broken recliner and propped his feet up. By then the beer was sinking into his system. Acanthus could tell this by the relaxed expression on

the man's wrinkled face. The tension leaving from his body seemed to smooth the creases.

"Mr. Palmer?" Acanthus asked with a bit of a quiver.

Mr. Palmer looked over at the boy with a lazy eye, "What that there, boy?" He was surprised the silent-tongued boy could speak.

"Any of y'all ever hear of a player by the name of Josh Gibson?"

Mr. Palmer returned his attention to his bottle, and lifted it to his mouth. He took a swig, and let it roll silkily down his throat before answering the boy, "Yeah, what of it? He one of the best hitters in the Negro League, play for the Homestead Grays."

"How come I don't never hear mention of him on the radio?"

Mr. Palmer spat beer and laughter out of his mouth, the gathered joined in. Acanthus was confused, his eyebrows drew in a bit, and his face flushed red.

"What's the matter? I say something funny?" He asked.

"Boy, your Ma keep you that tight and closed up?" Mr. Palmer inquired, after his laughter subsided.

"What you mean by that, Mr. Palmer?"

"Boy, when you ever hear mention of any Negro player on that white folks' box? Them white folks ain't studyin bout no Negro ballplaya. Hell, that don't even let us play against they asses. An you think they gonna mention us on they box?"

Acanthus was still at a loss, "But I hear the games all the time."

The gathered roared with laughter once more, a few shook their heads.

"Young blood," One of them butted in. He was slim with raggedy teeth. His overalls looked as though they were on the verge of swallowing him whole, "What your

Ma teaching you? Don't you know they's a line what them white folks won't let us culluds cross? They's got two worlds, a black one and a white one, and they don't mix. Not now, not never."

"He must thank that lick of color of his exclude'im. Ma must got him thanking he white. You might look it, but you ain't it." A rotund man sitting on the edge of the porch added. He looked miserable in his rolls of fat.

"Leave the boy alone. He don't know no better." Ray Johnson defended. His voice rang out rich and husky with a tinge of velvet lining. He was one of the more younger ones. "What got you so stuck on Josh Gibson for, lil fellow?"

"I met him once. Down at the depot. He gave me this hat."

"Let me see." Ray reached for the hat. Acanthus handed it to him with some apprehension. It was his prized possession. He didn't want anything to happen to it.

Ray examined the hat from brim to brim, felt the fabric as if looking for something in particular, then held the part where the signature lay close to his eyes. He smiled to himself, and softly rubbed his fist along the inside of the cap, then tried it on for size.

"Looka here. How's it look?" He searched each face for a reaction. He only got stares. There was power in that cap, he convinced himself. He started pretending that he was at bat.

"Give that boy his hat back, fool." Mr. Palmer hollered. Ray's quick moves were not only getting on his nerves but making his eyes dizzy.

"What's the matter old man? Mad 'cause you ain't got moves like this? Old bones getting jealous?" Ray replied playfully. He continued his baseball antics.

Acanthus was growing worried that the man's sweaty bald head would wear away the signature.

"I mean it, Ray. Stop all that." Mr. Palmer continued. "You look like a prized fool."

Ray stopped his play, and gave the hat back to the boy, "There you go, lil one."

"That boy ain't seen little in ages." The fat man replied. "He near bout as tall as you."

"Show is, but he still a boy." Ray retorted. "What your Ma feed you boy? You look strong as a mule. You built like one of them players."

"Too bad he ain't got the skill. He show could make a name for himself, and get out this lil town." Mr. Palmer added.

"I got some skills." Acanthus heard himself say.

Mr. Palmer and some of the others laughed.

"What? In cooking, and cleaning- and book stuff?" The fat man replied.

Acanthus felt offended.

"Boy, you ain't nothing but a Mama's boy. I smell her milk on you from here."

The fat man continued. Acanthus was growing angrier by the minute.

"I do so got skills! I bet I can sock your fat ass clean cross Main Street and back!"

There was a silence- a swishing around of thoughts. The men looked from one to the other in shock, and then Ray broke the silence with laughter. Others soon joined in- all save the fat man, who was still trying to catch his tongue.

“Boy, you got fire in you yet.” Ray went to him and patted him on the back. He shook his head, “Some fire.”

“You just let me get a hold of your yellin’ ass.” The fat man arose. The porch rocked with a bit of relief.

“Charles, hold up now.” Someone said as he and another tried holding the fat man back. Acanthus did not budge, and had no intentions of doing so.

“He just a boy.” Someone added.

“Boy or not. You don’t talk to grown folks that way.” Charles growled as he fought the two little men off of him. A few other men latched on to the huge tub of flesh. Pap came out onto the porch. He looked to Palmer.

“What the hell going on here?”

“Charles got out of the way wit the boy. The boy just defending his own.”

“Uh-uh, y’all gonna have to get on way from here wit all this. You scarin the customers.” Pap threw out over the crowd of noise. His voice was shrill, and fell on deaf ears. Palmer struggled from his seat to assist with calming things down. He put his fingers to his mouth and blew out a whistle as loud as that of a train’s.

“Cool it!” He shouted. “Charles, sit your ole ass down. Leave the boy be.”

Charles shook his arms free. The men slung off like ants. The big man resumed his seat, but kept his hot eyes on the boy.

“Now, if I hear anymo noise from any of yous out here I’m callin the law.” Pap announced. He made sure his eyes met each of theirs, including the boy’s, to let them know he meant business. Satisfied with the response, he retreated back into his store. Everyone settled.

“Boy you ain’t as soft as I thought.” Palmer commented as he slung the now half bottle to his lips.

“I didn’t mean no harm.” Acanthus finally said, eyes intent on the fat man. Charles just solemnly waved him off.

“You got skills you say?” Palmer studied the boy’s face to see if there was truth or lie in it.

“Yes, Sir. I hit pretty well.”

Palmer looked at him suspiciously, “Then how come you ain’t on the local team?”

Acanthus shrugged.

Charles volunteered an answer, “Cause he ain’t doing nothin but lyin.”

“Alright now, Charles. Stand down.” Palmer advised.

“It ain’t a lie.” Acanthus defended firmly.

“Prove it then.” Charles challenged.

Palmer thought on it a moment, “Ray, go in there an see if Pap’ll loan us a bat an ball.”

Ray rushed up the steps and into the store. He soon returned with a wooden bat and ball, “Pap say, don’t walk off wit his stuff, no.”

“Pap know us all out here. When he ever knowed us to take from him. Tell Pap I ain’t studying ‘bout him.” Palmer snatched the ball from Ray and handed Acanthus the bat. It was a foreign object to him. Acanthus only practiced with thick branches. He held the bat awkwardly, with the wrong side up.

“Look at’im. I told you he ain’t got a bit of skill. Look how he holding that thing.” Charles butted in.

Ray turned the bat right side up for the boy, "It's alright. He just nervous."

Palmer struggled his way down the steps, "Now, I 'ma throw you an easy one for starters- real simple."

Acanthus nodded, and put himself into proper position. Ray situated the glove on his right hand and stood behind and to the right of the boy.

"Ready?" Palmer asked.

The boy and Ray nodded. Palmer wound his arm back in a full circle once, then a half circle, raised and bent his left leg, then threw his whole body into the pitch.

Acanthus swung and missed.

Charles laughed greedily, "You see, I told y'all."

Ray ran after the ball. Once retrieved, he tossed it back to Palmer.

"Concentrate, don't let his jive get to ya."

Acanthus repositioned himself. He could hear a sports announcer in his head dictating a play. He followed the voice's lead, and this time hit the ball farther than the eye could see. Mouths dropped and eyes searched the air.

"Damn, boy. You got power there." Palmer replied.

A wide smile surfaced on the boy's face. He didn't believe the site himself. None of his thick balls of string ever went so far.

Ray patted him on the back, "Wooweee! Boy, you weren't lyin."

Charles was sore, "Aw, that ain't nothin but luck."

"Luck my foot. Ain't all the luck in the world could knock a ball like that. Ray, go get another one."

"I ain't going in there to have Pap all over me."

“Aw, you ain’t nothin but a wuss. Frank, go see if you can get another ball out of Pap. Tell him put it on my tab.”

The limber legged man did as told. He returned shortly thereafter with another ball, and an angry faced Pap.

“Palmer, what’s this I hear about your tab? Nigga, you know your tab long as this street here.”

“Come on Pap, you know I’m good for it. You gotta see the swing on this boy here. He’d almost put that Ruth fella to shame.”

Pap folded his arms, “This I gotta see. But you payin for them two balls out of this week wages.”

Palmer wound up another pitch. Acanthus sent the ball careening into the air, on the same path as the one that proceeded it.

“Hot damn!” Pap shouted.

“Didn’t I tell ya.” Palmer added.

“Boy, where you been hiding that talent at? My word. Briggs better do somethin about getting him on the team.” Pap continued.

“Sho nuff.” Another affirmed.

Charles sat silently, stewing in shame.

Chapter

21

1932 crawled in with hunger pangs. The country had long since been under a depression, 1929 could attest to that, but for folks in Backwaters its sting was not as obvious, at least not at first. The flood of '27 set them so far back into poverty that they wore it with no shame. By the time the real depression came along, they were already so accustomed to that way of life that they didn't even recognize the difference. For the blacks, it was easier to adjust because they had nothing to begin with. Poverty was their way of life. They lived in it well, so much so that an outsider might suspect that they were hiding their grief beneath the guise of laughter on paint-peeled porch fronts, or in steaming lovemaking beneath a blood-burning moon. They were used to living without-used to knocking from door to door asking for a pinch of salt here and a cup of flour there, used to the paint falling off of walls, and covering up holes in the floor with flour sacks and whatever else. But in 1932 things got worse. The poor got poorer and were feeling the effects. Jobs that were usually reserved for blacks were now given to the whites. Governor Long was making great strides to improve the state, orchestrating projects to have bridges built, roads paved, and railroads constructed. But times were so hard that white men started resorting to manual labor. This took jobs from the black men,

and it didn't help either that the black Creoles in Lafitte were cutting back on their labor force as well. With each passing day, Sarpy took with him fewer and fewer men. The womenfolk too were sent back home many a day, because housekeeping was an extra expense the well to do could more and more live without. Even the duo at 1011 felt the effects. Dahlia lost clientele everyday. The black schoolteacher and Reverend Toliver had long since cut their service with her, even before her white clientele started narrowing down. But she survived. There were still a few well off whites who refused to stoop so low as to do their own laundering- they didn't care how hard times had gotten, their hands were not made for scrubbing.

With funds so low, the black schoolhouse had to shut down way before cropping season. Things were a mess, true, but life went on. The sun kept rising, folks kept breathing, and the seasons kept spinning. The radio kept the duo at 1011 plenty company. Acanthus got lost in the baseball games and Westerns, while Dahlia fell at bay to the soap operas and upbeat jazz tunes. The radio reawakened her youth- set her mind to thinking about teenybopper dreams of silk kisses, warm touches, and the queasiness of love. It was funny. The world was in a depression, and she was coming alive. This puzzled Acanthus, but he didn't complain. He was happy that she was happy, and that was all that mattered. Sometimes in the silliness of it all, she would get to dancing, and invite him on the dance floor. She showed him how to two-step, cakewalk, Charleston, Lindy Hop, and Jitterbug. The dancing eased his heartache, but most of all it connected him to her and made him feel safe and forgiven. But for her, it set juices spinning of another kind. Sometimes in the midst of their dancing, she would imagine that the boy was the good doctor, which made her feel the beat of the music all the more. Acanthus

just thought she was finally enjoying his company. But he soon learned that that was not the case.

It was on the day that Acanthus led the local baseball team to the finals. Dahlia had not gone to the game. Baseball and sports of any kind bored her. She had gone to Acanthus' first three games to lend her support and that was it. She asked the boy to understand, but he did not, although for her sake he pretended to. He was overjoyed about his team's victory, and having been instrumental in making it come to pass. Coach Briggs was going to have a celebration at his house, with a humble menu of soda pop and peanuts- just a little something to let his players know that their hard work was appreciated. But Acanthus had to rush home first. He had to tell his Ma about his victory, but most of all to see her face unfold with pride as he relayed the game play by play. He rushed home, the wind licking at his cleats. Ray could hardly keep up with him, but managed. Acanthus flew up the steps, and left Ray staggering towards a post.

Acanthus' heart pounded outside of himself, but soon dropped when he walked in on the scene. The box was spitting out a fast jazz tune, but there in the center of the room was his Ma and Doctor O'Behr dancing slowly and tasting one another's lips. Red flushed through the boy. He acted before he could even speak. He rushed into the doctor with the force of a hurricane. Their fall knocked a hole in the wall. The boy started swinging. He didn't want to stop until he saw red. Dahlia screamed, and tried with all of her might to pull the boy off of the doctor. But there wasn't much her one hundred and fifteen pounds could do against the force of the angry one. Ray heard the commotion and rushed in. He managed to pull the boy away from the cowering doctor. He dragged the boy to the back of the house, and into the back yard.

“Catch a hold of yourself, Acanthus! What’s going on?”

The boy jerked himself away from Ray. His chest rose and fell violently. Heat radiated from his eyes, “He was touching her, and kissing her! He gotta wife, why don’t he leave my Mama alone?”

“Listen, lil one, I understand your frustrations, but beating a man to death ain’t gonna do nothing but cause more trouble. Now your Ma must know what she doing. You gotta stay out of grown folks’ business, partner.”

“She is my business.” Acanthus had his hands on his hips. He was still huffing and puffing. He looked to the door like he wanted run back in and finish what was started.

“What say, you and me go on down to Brigg’s place- pop a few sodas, eye a few girls.” He nudged the boy playfully, but somehow the humor did not rub off, “Come on, man. He ain’t worth it.” He pulled the boy by the arm, and dragged him to their destination, all the while hoping that a soda pop and the sight of girls would ease the young one’s nerves.

Acanthus sat away from the crowd. Ray had given him a cool rag to wrap around his busted knuckles. Dots of blood seeped through the white cloth. The pain was setting in, hitting him in sharp spurts. He guzzled down the orange pop, but it did nothing to soothe his nerves or the breaking within, though he gulped it down all the more hoping that by the time he reached the bottom the images would disappear. But they remained.

His Ma's face stood out the most. Her eyes left an ice chill, and her face carried no shame. It was a face full of anger that gnawed away at her softness and made her look ugly. He didn't like seeing her that way. To shake the haunting image, he nestled his back against the pecan tree, closed his eyes and rested his head against the hard bark. Ray had left him for a spell to socialize with the womenfolk.

With the closing of his eyes, he slipped away. A woman came to him- drifted into his mind as soft as a shadow and as sneakily as a ghost. She was dark, and the aura about her was dark. Acanthus found himself paralyzed. He could not move limb or mouth. In his mind he tried calling for help, but none came. The woman advanced towards him. Her eyes did not leave his as she spoke.

“It ain't too late. I can lift it, if you let me.”

She repeated the phrase over and over. It rang out in echoes. Each repetition seemed to loop about him, ready to squeeze him in with the force of a threatened boa constrictor. He felt heavy and drugged as he gasped for air. It all seemed real, for his surroundings were the same. He was sitting on the same wooden crate beneath the shady pecan tree, the crowd was in the distance, and the sky was still turning over into evening. But there was a touch of un-realness about it. There could be no doubt in his mind of this. He tried rocking himself awake, but could not. He even tried cursing the woman with his mind, but she was unmoved. Then suddenly it came to him to call upon Jesus, for his Auntie Camellia often relayed that calling upon Him enabled her to escape such nightmares. So he called upon Him, and before he could even pronounce the last “s”, he was rocked awake, only to find a girl standing over him. Her visage shook him all the more and sent him toppling over. She giggled innocently. He composed himself, arose

and dusted the grass from his red and white striped uniform. She was tickled, and began to help him rid his hair of the grass strands. He was so embarrassed. There before him was the vision he worshipped daily from his window. He never imagined that he would be so near to her, although he wished for it every night.

She smelled like fresh laundry- a sweet pure scent. He was becoming drunk with her and lightheaded- so much so that he almost fell over once again, but she caught him.

“You must’ve been drinking more than soda.”

Acanthus shook his head. He was losing himself in her face. It was heart-shaped, tender brown, and as smooth as porcelain. Sunshine seemed to emit from it. She continued to help him stay at bay on the crate. His face drew up into a knot. Another pain had hit. He secured the raveled rag back into place.

“What happened to your hand?” She asked with concern, while busying herself with gathering fallen pecans, “You didn’t hurt it in the game did you?”

He said nothing. He was not in the mood for explaining.

“I was at the game this afternoon.” She watched his face for a stir, “You play really well.”

Acanthus finally stumbled upon words, “Thank you.” He found it odd that he was so drawn to a girl that shared the same blood as Doctor O’Behr. He supposed he forgave her because she had no choice in choosing who her parents were. Besides, she wasn’t any threat to him, and seemed to be the complete opposite of her conniving father. He watched her as she stooped and gathered pecans into her dress. She picked up each one with a mother’s care.

“You gonna get your dress dirty.” He told her.

“I can’t get much dirtier than you, now can I?” She teased him.

He looked down at himself. The filth from the baseball game was still on him, along with strands of grass from his falling. His face flushed red with embarrassment.

“Well, boys are supposed to get dirty.” He retorted, returning his attention back to her. She had beanpole legs, this he saw as she raised her dress higher and higher to contain the growing load of pecans.

“You gone eat all of those?” He asked.

“You gone help me?” Her eyes shot up to his like those of a doe caught in the road, unsuspecting of the danger ahead. He arose and went to her. He took some of the pecans from her dress and put them into his cap.

“You best get back to your Ma fore she come looking for you.” He advised her.

“I’m alright. She talking to the schoolteacher Miss Hartly anyway.”

“She don’t want you around me.”

“She can’t pick my friends.”

“I’m your friend?” Acanthus asked with surprise.

She smiled like a pageant beauty, “You could be. You got nice eyes. Anybody with nice eyes can’t be so bad. I remember that time you came to my door and my Mama turned you away. When you looked back at me, I saw your eyes. They seemed to smile. What made you want to come see me that day?”

Acanthus was silent for a moment, then shrugged, “I don’t know. I guess I was just looking for somebody to talk to.”

“Oh.”

“You sure you don’t wanna go back to your Ma? She don’t look to be the type

you can cross easily.”

“She’s not as bad as she seems.”

“I don’t know, she sure threw a mean eye at me that day I came to see you.”

“She’s just protective. That’s the way all mothers are. Isn’t yours?”

Acanthus couldn’t give her a quick response. He had to think about it a spell. As he recounted the events of his life, he deduced that he was far more protective of her than she of him. Her receptive attitude towards the doctor as of late was evidence of this. Though there must have been some ounce of care in her heart for him, for she tried at best to protect him from whatever monster there was over in Lafitte, and took him out of public school. She even nursed him back to health after his near-death experience. There had to be some love in her for him- had to be, or at least he hoped.

“I suppose.” He finally said.

“You don’t sound sure.”

“I don’t wanna talk about her right now.”

“It has something to do with my Daddy, huh?”

“What?”

“Your Ma and my Daddy. You don’t like them being friends, do you? ”

“And you do?”

“I didn’t say that. Look, all I mean is that my Daddy isn’t a bad man. He and your Ma are just friends. A man and a woman can be friends.”

“Funny, your Ma don’t see it that way and neither does anybody else. You don’t know what you talkin about.” He was on the verge of spilling the words out, but then he looked into her face. He didn’t want to say anything to change the way it was, God

would surely punish him if he dared take away her innocence. So he bit his lips to trap the words in. He wanted to scream out that her Daddy was all over his Ma, and that they were starting something more than friendship, but her face would not let him.

“What were you going to say?”

He shook his head, “Nothing.”

“Yes you were.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

She settled on the grass- legs laced Indian-style. With her teeth, she cracked open a pecan and picked away the shell.

“You doing it all wrong.” He advised.

“Huh?”

“You don’t crack it that way.” He sat beside her and took a pecan from his cap, “You supposed to hold it sideways, so you can crack it down the middle. And you don’t bite all the way through. You just crack it just enough so you can break it apart into two halves. That way you can pull the pecan out easily. Plus by doing it that way you don’t mix the shell with the nut. Here, watch me.” He demonstrated to her his method, then handed her the two perfectly split halves.

She ate both, and nodded in agreement, “You’re right, they do taste better without the shells.”

They shared a laugh, and commenced peeling more pecans using his method. His heart felt less sore in her presence. She had him so relaxed that he almost forgot about the angry woman waiting for him at home.

Chapter

22

He was afraid to approach her, but his heart made him reach out. It was that insistent something that kept him loving her more and more as she pulled apart from him. But she didn't see it as love. It was nothing more than selfishness and jealousy- a boy who held on too tight. She was tired of his pulling, tired of the violent fits of anger, tired of him standing in the way of her and whomever else she welcomed into her heart. She brushed her cotton-candy soft hair violently as she studied him in the mirror. He advanced towards her. She quickly arose and went to her room, slamming the door behind. The house was silent for days-an uncomfortable silence. The two were grieving in their own way. He for her, and she for the doctor.

He made a mess of things. She couldn't easily forgive him for that. He interrupted yet another almost moment, and now there was no telling when another one would arise- if at all. He scared him away. The doctor ran off to his wife with his tail tucked between his legs. Dahlia didn't even have the chance to wipe away the blood, nor apologize. It was as if the knock against the wall knocked something into him. That something seemed to awaken him to the fact that what he and she were about to do was wrong. It had all been wrong.

When he rushed past her and didn't look back, she felt the beginnings of emptiness. It was a familiar feeling- the same that the boy's father had left behind. It

was like the violent stokes of an eraser, trying at best to rub away a mistake. The feeling made her fold within. She had to brace herself for the sorrow to come. At first she tried to fight against it. She prayed a novena to Saint Jude, the Patron of hopeless cases. But by the ninth day, no change had come. The doctor remained distant and greeted her as if she were a stranger. But still she did not back down. She prayed a thirty-day's prayer to Saint Joseph, but he too seemed to ignore her request. Two years had passed and she had gone through just about every saint- none had answered her. It was as if heaven had turned its back on her. She was on the verge of giving up on her fight, for there seemed to be no more use. The sorrow had aged her. There about her eyes were the beginnings of crow's feet. And to her dismay, she found a strand of gray in her hair one morning. She remembered the moment well. She was sitting at her vanity and the radio was softly playing in the background. The announcer had interrupted one of her favorite songs to report that someone had shot Governor Long. The moment was numbing. She couldn't recall if the chilling words had turned that strand of hair white, or if it had been that way all the long. She stumbled to the radio to turn it up a notch so that she could better hear the details. It was a sour moment to say the least. The announcer did not seem hopeful. Dahlia turned off the radio, and drifted back to her vanity. Life was heavy on her mind- hers in particular. She stared at the gray hair a spell. Was this her end- to be old and settled by age thirty-four? Where had the years gone? Seventeen seemed like yesterday. Her life had began and ended at that tender age. She had fallen in love with a dream, and within the same blink of an eye he left her with a nightmare. Where was the justice in that?- this she asked God and His angels, but got no reply. She would take matters into her own hands. She was determined to not become an old maid.

Meanwhile her boy had grown into a man. He was now seventeen. There was stubble above his lip and underneath his chin. And he was big and fine- a heartbreaker. The sport of baseball had chiseled his thighs into fine thick columns. Many a girl doted on how they would feel against their own amidst lovemaking. It was as if his manhood erased all those years of insult and gossip centered around he and his troublemaking crazy Ma. Even some of the older womenfolk found their eyes wandering to the young man's firm buttocks and big arms as he helped them with their groceries. His eyes too were known to set a spell. They were the color of lemon iced tea, with flicks of sunlight dancing in and about them. But he was ignorant of his affect on the female sex, for there was only one he now wished to impress, and her name was Sojourner. But she regarded him as nothing more than a friend- someone as harmless as a brother. He wished to change that, but didn't know how. Sometimes he would talk it over with Precious Dolby, who as of late was looking at him with heavy hungry eyes.

"I just don't know what to do to make her see me as more, Precious."

They were sitting on her bed. She was nestled at the head and he at the foot. Her bedroom had long since been their meeting place, every since that moment long ago when she was about to clue him in on the mystery.

She was older now, knocking on the door of forty-one. But she had aged well. Her skin was still tight, buttocks still firm and tempting, and her appetite for love had grown. But she was tired of men her age. They could do nothing for her, but spoil her with things, and give her all of five minutes of passion. She wanted more than that. Younger men started appealing more and more to her, but there was one in particular who set a surge through her blood. He met with her frequently, perching himself at the edge

of her bed, looking needy.

“Precious, you there?” Acanthus asked in a husky voice as rough as sandpaper. It was a voice that ran through her as calm and quiet as a sleeping river.

She looked at him deeply, as she caressed her left leg with her right bare foot in a seductive up and down motion. This made him uncomfortable.

“Maybe I should come back another time.” He arose.

“Boy sit yourself on down. Precious just thinking is all.”

He sat back down as instructed, and licked his full salmon lips in nervousness. They glistened deliciously amidst the glow of the falling sun glaring through the window beside her bed. She imagined they tasted like sweetwater.

“What you thinking about that got you so lost?” He finally asked her.

Her eyes never once left his face. She found comfort there. “Precious thinking about your situation with that Miss O’Behr. Precious thinking of a way to fix it.”

The words both interested and eased him. He looked at her with eager eyes as he relaxed himself a little more on the bed, “Well, what’d you come up with?”

She flashed a devious smile. It lit up her face like a jack-o-lantern. She found herself giggling uncontrollably and threw her head back. The laughter felt good, like much needed medicine.

“Oh sweetness, Precious gonna teach you what a woman like. You see us women got secrets we don’t dare tell men. But I can let you in on a few.” She crawled towards him like a tigress, “Maybe more if you let me.” She softly blew a breath against his lips, and looked into his eyes for a reaction. His pupils expanded then contracted. She smiled, “You can take what I teach you and maybe use it on that girl of yours.” She paused, and

drew even closer to him. She rubbed her fingers gently about his ears. They felt like peaches to the touch. “Who knows, sweetness. Maybe by the time we finish your lessons, you won’t want her no more.” She smiled again, and took his lips into her own. Lesson one began, and it did not end until the following morning, and that was only because she had to scurry off to work.

In the morning light, he lay bare to the world. A new something had settled comfortably into him. He was afraid of this new thing, but at the same time liked it. Even long after Precious had gone off to work, he laid there in the quiet, with his arms folded back, cradling his head. He looked to the ceiling, or rather beyond it. Even though it was a bumpy cracked thing, he saw its raw beauty. The morning sun falling on his nakedness warmed him- made him feel toasty within. He could lie there for hours, but chose not to. He too had to get to work before Pap sent a search party looking after him.

After he bathed himself, he set out. Precious’ house was only a few doors down from Pap’s, but the walk that morning seemed five times as long. Spirits were swirling in him that he never knew existed. The world seemed brighter and better somehow. And for the first time in his life, as folks passed by, he wasn’t afraid to look into their faces. Their judgements seemed no longer a bother. But his eyes couldn’t help but fall on the yellow house in the distance, his house. He thought of his Ma, and wondered if she even noticed that he did not come home last night, or even if she cared. He would visit her on his lunch break- maybe even bring her something to make amends, perhaps a nice colorful plastic bracelet, or a barrette for her beautiful hair. He loved her hair. It was her most redeeming feature. He remembered the times when he was younger, when she

would allow him to stroke it. It was a comforting morning and evening ritual for both of them. But he had not touched her hair in ages, not since he turned thirteen and spurts of anger set in. His tantrums distanced her from him. She did not like his touch anymore, for fear his growing fires would ruin once treasured moments. She lived on the memories of his touch, and so began brushing her own hair. Memories would have to suffice.

When he arrived at Pap's, the old man was out on the porch smoking his pipe. His butcher's smock was already dirty. He sat in one of the corn-shuck-bottomed chairs on the porchfront, with his right leg crossed over the left. He was savoring the woodsy manly aroma of the pipe's smoke as he contemplated and anticipated the day ahead. This was a morning routine of his. He would wake up before even the sun had a notion to, go down to the depot and gather the day's shipments, come back to the store, then clean, cut and package the meat, after which he'd come out onto the porch, settle into a chair and smoke his pipe. By then he would see Sarpy passing through, in that old pick up of his, and throw him a wave or a quick word. He would then sit and wait for the boy, who always arrived five or ten minutes ahead of time, but this morning Acanthus arrived right on time, which was late for him. He looked at the boy suspiciously, as if he were a stranger.

"Boy what got you this mawning? You late by your means." He puffed a cloud of smoke in his direction.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pap. I don't know what got into me." Acanthus leaned lazily against a post, and rested his head there as if it were a pillow. His eyes looked a little bit too dreamy to Pap.

"What you doing comin from that direction there?" He nudged his pipe in the

direction of east, towards the rising sun.

Acanthus was silent. All the while his mind was stumbling around for an appropriate answer that wouldn't tell too much, but just enough to satisfy the old man's curiosity.

Pap looked deeper into his face, "Don't tell me she done got to you."

"Who?"

"You can't bullshit, a bullshitter, boy." Pap laughed and took another drag from his pipe. "She done gave you a taste."

Acanthus' face flushed red.

"You ain't even gotta say. I saw her skipping out earlier. Dancing almost down that street. Your face and silence tell all. It ain't nothing to be ashamed of. She like a rite of passage. You ain't the first, but I suppose you already know that, as long as you been keeping company with her."

Acanthus stood silently, eyes thrown downward. Old shyness crept back in.

"Lift your head boy. You know you wanna lift it." Pap threw him a sly smile. Acanthus' head raised. He couldn't hold back for long. A smile spread across his face like that of a chess cat.

"Go on in there, and get started on the inventory." Pap advised, "And don't let me catch you drifting off today, no."

Acanthus hurried into the store to begin the day's work. On his lunch break he took a gift to his Ma. It was a turquoise colored barrette that he thought would look nice with her new dress of the same color.

She was out back when he arrived, sitting on the edge of the porch lost a little.

Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but some strands had escaped the rubber band and flew wildly about the back of her head, some into her face. The autumn wind was brisk. She did not have a coat on. Extra clothing always got in the way of her work, so she learned to do without whenever it could be helped. She sat as still as a doll- posture sloped a bit, as if her head was too much of a weight. She looked fragile, even though she was strong. Her visage tugged a bit at his heart, and almost drew tears, but he sucked them in.

“Ma, you gonna catch a cold, yeah. You need a coat on out in this wind.”

She looked up at him as innocently as a child. She had long since let go of her anger towards him, although the anger left something behind that surfaced in her eyes whenever she looked his way. It was grief. He knew that he was the cause of it being there, and was sorry for it. But he didn’t know how to make it go away, though he tried. He didn’t even get mad anymore when the doctor waved at her from a distance.

“Ma, I brought you something.” He took the intricately cut barrette from the paper bag. “It’d go good with your new dress. I seen you looking at it the last few times you been in the store.”

She smiled at the sight of it. He unlatched it and reached to put it in her hair, but she drew back. She was still wary of his touch.

“Where you been?” She asked as she took the barrette into her hand. She laid it on her lap, and unloosed her ponytail. Her hair fell about her shoulders in thick waves. His heart skipped once and then again. She combed it gently with her fingers, then gathered it all in-in an sweeping motion. The air became thick with the scent of olive. It was a comforting smell to the boy who was now a man, a scent that would follow him to

his grave and set him into peace in the Hereafter. She placed the barrette at the back of her head, near the crown, to hold the upswept do into place. The years had not stolen her beauty, he thought to himself, only made it better.

“You gone answer my question or what?” She asked, this time smiling a bit.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know that you’d be worried.”

“That’s not an answer to my question, Acanthus.”

She only pronounced his name properly when she was either mad at him, or wanted to discuss something serious.

Acanthus swallowed some saliva. He was nervous. He didn’t want to tell her the details. Standing there before her made his little escapade seem nasty- even adulterous. He couldn’t bear telling her the truth.

“Acanthus, boy, you hear me, yeah.”

“I was hanging out with Ray. I lost track of time.”

She slid the rubber band onto her slim wrist. It dangled there like a bracelet, “Is that so?” Acanthus nodded. She looked at him questionably, “Well, I guess Mr. Ray has a twin, or somebody posing to be him, ‘cause he was here with me the better part of the evening- waiting around for you.” She watched his face for a reaction.

“Maybe that was before we met. Yeah, we met at Pap’s later.”

“Now that’s funny. ‘Cause from what he told me, he couldn’t find head or tail of you. I told him he was welcome to sit and wait, but you never showed. He said he had some plays to go over with you for an upcoming game.”

Acanthus fell quiet.

Dahlia busied herself with folding a garment she pulled from the line, “You know

I don't like lies, boy. And I ain't ready to be a grandmother just yet." Her eyes darted back to his. She stared at him to make sure he understood.

"Mama it ain't like that."

"Who is she- got your head spinning? It ain't that girl from across the way, is it?" She didn't wait for him to answer, "But no, I don't imagine it could be her. From what I can recall you can't stand her father." Her eyes did not leave his.

"No, Mama. It ain't her- though I wish it were."

"Then who?" She was not about to let up.

Acanthus remained silent.

"I guess I will find out soon enough. This town ain't that big."

"Well, I gotta get back. I just dropped by to bring that to you." He turned to leave and in the process bumped into Charletta Mae. She had a little girl at the end of her arm, holding on tight.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Charletta. I didn't hear you walk up." Instant reflex made him reach out to catch her from an almost fall. She felt solid to the touch.

"Don't worry about it. Haven't seen much of you lately." She said. His touch reawakened something that lay dormant in her too long for her liking. She looked at him sweetly. He seemed changed in some way, but she couldn't tell if it was good or bad.

"Yeah, 'tween working at Pap's and practicing I don't see much of anyone lately."

"'Cept a certain mystery woman." Dahlia threw out.

"Oh, who you courting?" The thought crushed her a bit, but she asked the question all the same.

“No one special.” He replied.

“Must be to keep him out all night without a word.” Dahlia retorted.

“Well, It was nice seeing you. Forgive me, but I have to get back to work.” With that he rushed off. Charletta turned to watch him leave. She smiled a smile that was laced with old feelings.

Chapter

23

The lessons continued, and with each passing one he developed more and more of a confidence in his stride- a gait that struck concern in the older women. They detected a loss of innocence. He was no longer appealing to them in quite the same way. The look about him was just like that of all the others who had crossed on over to the next step. It was a look laced with lust and a bit of emptiness, one that was no longer that of a little boy's but that of a man's. It was this very fact that took their trust away. They began to question his sincerity when he smiled and bade them "Good Day", and thought he was looking for more than a tip when he carried their groceries home or made special deliveries. They wished the innocence had remained there just a tad bit longer, for he was such a handsome fellow- so much sweeter than most of the hoodlums that lived around their way. But in their hearts they knew that it had to end some day- seasons always changed, that was something that remained constant.

With his changing, they began warning their daughters, sisters, nieces, and anyone else running around in a skirt. They told them to not smile too much in his presence, or skip with too much gaiety, or even turn their feet a certain way, for fear that he might read something more into their actions than was intended- something that would give him the nerve to cross lines that weren't meant to be crossed. The warnings got

even stronger once word got out that Precious was the one who tainted his tea. The older women prayed under their breath, at least those who had too much gray and wrinkles to dream about the young strapping thing. Those who still had an ounce of heat bubbling through their blood welcomed the wet dreams that crept into them in the deep of night, as they laid next to stolid husbands, or empty crevices that once held warm bodies.

The young ones dreamed on him too. Some made extra and unnecessary trips to Pap's just to walk past him and catch his eye. Some giggled when they passed, but the bolder ones added a sashay to their walk- an extra twist that made their hobbyhorses rustle just enough beneath their cotton dresses to stir an itch or two in him. Others even found a reason to lift their skirts, swatting away imagined mosquitoes and other crawling things- either that or they would drop something purposely so that he could rush to their aid. If he was busy with a customer, they would drop things all the same, just so they could have the opportunity to bend over and taunt him with their goodies. Sojourner often giggled at their antics as she sat at the café-end of the store, sipping on a float he always made especially for her. She knew what they were up to, even if he was still a bit too slow to catch on. They envied her because he always put her on a pedestal, like she was his girlfriend, even though she didn't act like it.

"What you giggling about down there?" He would ask her as he leaned over the counter. Sometimes if he was lucky, at the right angle, he could catch a glimpse of her baseball bat legs. The years had filled them out beautifully. He remembered when they were mere sticks, but even then he worshipped them as if they were God's greatest gifts.

"Oh nothing." She teased as she swiveled around in her chair to face him. It was the actress in her that made her act so dramatically. She tossed her feather-weight brown

curls into the air, and slung her head back in a cute way that did justice to her long slender neck, “Just adoring the wonderful unfolding drama of Monsieur Fountainbleu’s escapades. Tell me, Monsieur, how do you keep count of your women? It must be quite hard.”

He only laughed, in an effort to hide a blush, but this in itself was an effort, seeing how in the fall and winter months his skin was as pale as any white man’s.

“Girl, stop it. You know I only got room in my heart for two. You and my Ma.”

She didn’t like when he talked that way, for she had already promised herself to another- Rutherford Lawrence. His daddy was a lawyer in New Orleans, and his Ma a music teacher. They were going to get married once he finished college at Fisk. They made this pact solid when they exchanged friendship rings. Neither ever took the other’s off.

“Acanthus, why do you always start this?” She turned herself back around to face the wall and sip on her float.

He leaned further over the counter to catch her attention, “You know we’re destined.” He yelled out.

“Oh, and is that why you keep nightly company with that old woman?”

“She’s not that old. What you got against her?”

“I think she’s sick. She’s old enough to be your mother.”

“Well, she don’t act like a mother a’tall.” He turned a few of Precious’ positions over in his mind and got lost a bit- long enough to annoy Sojourner.

She cast a disapproving eye on him, and made sure he saw it, “You’re sick too for encouraging her.”

“You jealous?”

“Not in the least.” She turned her attention back to her drink.

He grinned, “Well, I guess I’m gonna have to try a little harder.”

She ignored him. Moments later her beau entered the store. He carried a snobbish air about him. His shiny white and tan Stacy Adams gleamed in the sunlight and clapped loudly against the wooden floor planks. He wore his hair processed and marceled. Acanthus did not like him. He flaunted his riches without a care. He was surprised that Sojourner's mother had taken to him so well, seeing how she was as color-struck as his own grandmaman. Now mind you, Rutherford wasn't dark. He was the color of toffee, but to someone who had a skin complex he wasn't light enough. Acanthus supposed though that Mrs. O'Behr 's love of green cast out all prejudices- that and the fact that Rutherford's father was a Creole, who if he wanted to could Pass. This perhaps gave her hope that the boy's offspring would come out lighter than he. Acanthus shook his head. If that was what the woman was looking for-for her daughter then he could fill such shoes just as easily if not better. His family came from money too, old money, and he was as light as light could be. He wiped the countertop absent-mindedly as he glanced down the way, only to see Rutherford pawing over his one and only. The sight set a surge through him. Rutherford knew his doting got under his skin, and so did it all the more. He liked Acanthus as much as he liked him.

“I was thinking we go down to the creek, and watch the sun fall. How's that sound?” Rutherford announced loudly enough to catch the ears of the eavesdropping boy at the front end of the store. He grabbed a lock of her hair and kissed it adoringly, then looked at Acanthus to taunt.

In his younger years, Acanthus would have crossed over that counter and run through him, but now he was different. Since Sojourner befriended him he became a calmer person. She made him think before he acted, when it used to be the other way around. Now he fought silent wars. He pretended not to be bothered by Rutherford's brashness.

A girl came into the store. She was not much to look at, but by the time Acanthus serenaded her with compliments, she was elevated to the stature of at least a princess. Rutherford cut his eye and bit his lip. He took his girl by the arm and escorted her out, not however before throwing a smart word or two over his shoulder.

"Say grocer boy, don't you work too hard now. You know what they say about all work and no play."

"I'll see you same time tomorrow, Sojourner." Acanthus lashed back.

She gave a coy smile and waved him goodbye. Once they were two feet out of the door, Acanthus' attitude changed towards the girl he only moments before showered with compliments. He acted as if she was distracting him. She went off like a hurt puppy to gather the items her aunt had sent her off for.

The newness of her was wearing off. Besides that, he was growing more curious. He wondered if others made the same sounds as she did, moved as she did, smelled as she did- or was each different? He wanted to know, or rather had to know. This wondering kept pressing on him, making his sleep restless, and on some occasions non-

existent. He first tried drowning out the thoughts by making more frequent visits to her bed, assuming that this would cease them, but he was mistaken. They only grew. And as they grew he pushed himself further and further apart from her- sometimes to the point of even inventing excuses.

She was not stupid. She sensed that he was growing tired, but something unexpected happened along the way. She was falling for him, or rather had already fallen without a cushion to lighten the blow. No one had been able to turn her so senseless, at least not since the boy's father. And now his offspring was working his charm on her without even realizing it. It was hard to tell when it all started. Perhaps it began with her missing him on those nights when Pap kept him later at the store. He would come to her door, panting like a puppy because he had ran all the way there. His breath would seep through the tiny screen openings like the soft, soothing scent of baby's breath. Its warmth melted something inside of her. Sometimes she became so intoxicated that she couldn't keep track of his words. She only saw his lips, and visualized them moving all over her as gentle as rose petals. He would repeat his words to bring her to. But it was only after the third or fourth repetition that she would finally snap back.

"Huh, I'm sorry- what'd ya say, Sweetness?"

"I won't be able to make it tonight. Mr. Pap got me restocking. I don't know how long I'll be. I wouldn't want to disturb your beauty rest by coming here so late- not that you'd need it anyways."

She would blush at his wink, and dote on the white of his teeth. He rushed off as quickly as he came. And she stood there a moment too long, watching him go on his way. When she lost sight of his view, she would come out onto the porch to look further.

Emptiness enveloped her during those moments. It bubbled over so big that it almost wiped out the guilt- almost, but not quite. She felt as if she were birthing twins. Reflex made her rub the sore spot, but no ounce of rubbing could heal its pangs. So it was no wonder that she always found herself stumbling to her bed. There she curled up to the pillow that he lay on, and took in the scent of olive that his head pressed there. The scent would hold her until his next visit- at least in the beginning. But as time moved on and his curiosity grew wilder, his scent would comfort her for only so long, and then she would set out to find him in a frenzy. First she would go to the store, and make small talk with the gathered men. They would tease her about “young stuff”, and make suggestions that she would do better with someone more aged. She of course would entertain them a bit, but all the while her eyes would be looking wildly past the store’s screendoor, in search of him within. She prayed silently under her breath that she would find him there- maybe in the back taking inventory, or calculating the books. But more times than often her prayers went unanswered. It was then that she would start probing Pap for his whereabouts- Well, did he say where’d he be? What time he left? Did he leave with somebody? You think he meeting Ray to go over some plays? How’d he look when he left? He say anything about me?

“Gal, I don’t know! He round here somewheres. This town ain’t that big!” And with that Pap brushed her off. He didn’t like seeing her that way- any woman that way. She was acting too needy. He always figured that a woman of her type could never fall so low. But if you lived in the world as long as he had, you could rest assured that you would see just about anything- yes, even a strong woman made weak by puppy love.

Sometimes, without even realizing it, she would comb the streets in her robe. The

spikes of her hair would cut through the night like freshly sharpened knives. She looked everywhere until she found him. One night she found him at Benny's Juke joint, curled up in a corner, with a bottle of beer in one hand, and a busty, pouty-lipped girl in the other. She tore into that place like a mad woman. The girl scurried off in one direction, and Acanthus stirred Precious in the other. He thought the night air would give her room to breathe and think.

"What the hell, you think you doing?" She hollered before they even reached the front door.

"What's wrong with you?" He asked in an even tone laced with mock-innocence.

"You what's wrong. You told me we were gonna have some time tonight. What happened to that?" Her voice was getting louder with each word. She didn't care who heard her. She wanted them to know that he was hers, and prayed to God that any girl with a lick of sense would heed the warning.

"You been drinking?" He asked, as he tried to take her gently by the arm.

She slung his hand away, "There's a thing called common courtesy. I know you can't be that young and stupid!"

She was embarrassing him. He didn't like being made a spectacle of. Old rage was beginning to set in. He had to hold his tongue. He took her roughly by the arm, and stirred her in the direction of Main Street. They would need to discuss the matter privately. By the time they reached her house, his anger had subsided. He sat her on the bed. She balled over in tears. Her body went as limp as a wilted flower. He knelt beside her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you'd react this way."

She said nothing, for she was ashamed of herself. Her hands remained cupped to her eyes, to catch the falling tears. He gently peeled them away from her face, and kissed where the wetness was. The bitter taste of her tears made him remorseful. He took her into his arms and tried to rock away the sadness. He did not leave her until morning.

That was the first episode, but others followed. They all had the same end results. She would become hysterical, hunt him down, and break up his secret meetings, some of which led her to the very beds or wherever else he and his conquests would be nestled up together. After a while she learned to tolerate his women on the side, only because she knew that he would end up in her arms by the night's end. Of course this was not much, but it would suffice. It would have to if this was the only way he would allow her to have a piece of him. But what she and the others chose to ignore was the fact that he only wanted one in particular-anyone else was just a mere substitute until she came around.

Chapter

24

Autumn skies in Backwaters are seductive. How could the sight of sleepy-eyed blues, golden rod yellows, warm peaches, and hazy violets not whip you into a spell or at least send you to dreaming? Clouds have a way of playing tricks on you. In the right light and at the right angle you can see what's been there all the long. In the evening time folks in Backwaters studied the sky. They would sit out on their porches and try to read what God was telling them. They believed their Maker had coded messages concealed up there, and it was just a matter of decoding the message to discover the knowledge that lied therein. A sky with too much pink forewarned danger, and if it bled with too much blue or violet, you could rest assured sorrow was on the way. Yellows however signaled luck and fortune, while peaches marked the advent of passion. A mixed sky, bleeding with all hues, meant there was no telling what was to come-.you would just have to watch and wait, doubt nothing, and expect all, for God doesn't want you to know everything, only enough to get by. Where would the mystery be if one knew all? There would be no more wonder in anticipating days to come, or taking the next breath. Life would be bland. For folks like Ma Sabine, blandness was just part of the package. Folks who are blessed, or as they might put it cursed, with a second pair of eyes have no mysteries to

contemplate, although they hold many- the mysteries of others. But often there is no joy in holding the hidden things of others. These hidden things barge in on you like unwelcome guests. They sit in your parlor, watch your every movement, lie in your bed a tad bit too long, eat all your food, and stay until their moods tell them otherwise. You can not shoe them away for the life of you, so you must tolerate them- feed them- give them all that they wish, lest they make their stay a ten-fold curse. Ma Sabine lived with such thoughts everyday of her life. Even as an infant they camped in her mind and haunted her like ghosts. She saw her mother's head chopped off by a jealous lover, a year before it actually happened. Oh how she wished she could have warned her, but she was too young. Words hadn't even become a concept to her yet. So she was forced to watch the agony with tear-filled eyes, unable to do a thing as the cane blade tore through the pencil thin neck. Blood went everywhere. One can only imagine that the sky the day before must have been spilling over with pink.

But like many cursed with her lot, she tried pretending the thoughts and visions were not really there. She tried ignoring the wandering dead folks who brought her their problems and last requests, and closed her ears to voices that whispered things about people she didn't know. But she could not fight these things. She could not pretend that they were not there. Ignoring them only brought more of them, so she caved in and started to listen. She went to the people the voices and visions told her to warn. Many of them shuddered as the little girl of nine told them things unknown. Needless to say she was not warmly received. No one wanted to hear bad news. They told her that she had demons in her. Many tried coming to her in the deep of night and immerse her in holy water. One woman almost drowned her. She became an angry child, and began keeping

her thoughts to herself.

One summer of her youth, luck would have it that the white folks who owned her and her Aunt Claris packed them up and moved to The City, New Orleans. Her Aunt saw the move as an answer to her prayers, for she was tired of people's wicked stares, and threatening the life of the only link she had left to her dead sister. She was convinced that people in The City had more open minds. And she was right. It was there that Ma Sabine found comfort. It so happened that one Sunday she and her aunt took a stroll through Congo Square. It was like trudging through a circus, theatre, and jungle packed into one small box. Excitement was at every turn. Women danced barefoot to the beat of handmade drums, Indians negotiated the sell of corn, potatoes, and other crops, while little boys shuffled for money, and begged customers to allow them to carry groceries home. A woman by the name of Mystic Cyan was overwhelmed by the little girl's presence.

"Where you get all them thoughts from, gal? Yeah, I talkin to you there."

Ma Sabine turned and looked the woman blankly in the face.

"You stand there lookin, but I talkin to you yeah. Come."

Ma Sabine looked to her Aunt for permission.

The woman with the silk red scarf tied about her head did not budge from her booth, "I mean no harm. I just want to talk wit her is all. I no do her nothing." Mystic Cyan looked into Aunt Claris' eyes in a mesmerizing fashion. "Please, allow her. I no take much of your time. She there spillin over wit things she don't understand. I must teach her to deal wit these things, let me." At that she stood, although it seemed like she still appeared to be sitting. She was a short yellow woman, no more than four feet off the

ground, if that much. She went to the two, carrying along with her strong smells of smoke and herbs.

“She got the gift. Someone must learn her to use it wise. I learn her if you let me?”

“I don’t know.” Aunt Claris’ thin voice seemed even thinner in the mystic’s presence. She was shaking inside, because she had heard stories about voodoo women, and none of those stories ever had happy endings. She didn’t want her or her niece to end up as gossip. Reflex made her let loose of the girl’s hand and pull her closer towards her. “Look we gotta be on our way. Our Missus don’t like for us to stay off too late.”

“But it be Sunday. White folks ain’t studyin bout your whereabouts, this your day.”

Aunt Claris tried inching off as she spoke, “Yes it is, but, you don’t understand my Missus. We ain’t from here. She keep close watch on her nigras. Now please.”

“You lie. I see you lie. I no do you nothing. I no evil doer. I do God’s work.”

Aunt Claris was not convinced. She pulled the girl alongside her and rushed off down the street. They did not visit The Square after that episode, but that didn’t keep the woman away from Ma Sabine. She came to her in visions, beckoning her to come see her. Finally the girl got fed up and met with the nagging mystic. She did as instructed and told her Aunt that the Missus had given her an errand to run, then she sped off into sunlight. Her feet led her to a street past Rue Champs D’Elysee. The Creole woman was waiting for her by a rusted wrought-iron gate that led into a courtyard.

“Come it’s okay.” Mystic Cyan assured. Her wrinkled hand rested heavy on the girl’s shoulders. The girl shuddered at the thought of the woman’s age spots falling off

of her hand and crawling over her own body.

The woman led her inside of the courtyard to a stone table next to a birdbath. She fed her a helping of figs and mint tea, as she discussed the girl's gifts.

"I learn you how to use them. You must use them for good. No evil, hear?"

Ma Sabine nodded. Her large protruding forehead shone in the sunlight like a freshly polished globe. She could feel the sun beating on her back.

"We get you out of this heat, okay? We go inside. It be much cooler there. Cyan won't keep you long. I know you worry about your Aunt."

Fear made her want to run, but curiosity made her grab hold of the woman's hand and follow. Mystic Cyan lived in a complex. Her room was on the ground floor. It was tight, and smelled of things unknown. Pictures of crucifixes, and saints covered the walls. There were statues of saints too scattered here and there. An altar for Saint Joseph was set up in one corner. There were various items of food splayed at his feet, and beads wrapped about his neck.

"Nothing to fear." She assured the frigid girl. "Sit."

Ma Sabine sat at the appointed seat, next to a tiny table that held bones and dust.

For a while the woman just studied the little girl, not saying a word. The child grew fearful with each passing moment. Perhaps she had made a mistake.

"Do not be afraid of Cyan. Cyan do you no harm, how many times do I have to say?" With that, she pulled her chair up so that she was face to face with the girl. She took the girl's hands into her own, closed her eyes, and breathed a deep breath.

"Now you do the same wit me." She instructed. The girl did as told.

"Relax. Again."

With the second breath Ma Sabine felt more at ease. She took another and then another.

“This bring harmony within. It quiet everything so you can think clear. You feel clearer, no?”

Ma Sabine nodded. They took a few more breaths, and then the woman sent her on her way.

“You come back tomorrow. I show you more.”

The girl returned the next day, and the day after that and then some. There came a point when she didn’t even make up excuses to tell her aunt. She just slipped off, and returned in due time for supper each evening without a word of where she had been or what she had been doing.

Time passed and her understanding of her gifts grew with each visit, but shadows lurked beneath, spurred on by frequent talks with Mystic Cyan’s neighbor, Francis Scott. She too was a medium, but didn’t care to use her gift for good so much. She was a tall red woman, with thick dark lips, and a flat Indian nose. Beady black eyes were nestled far apart on her face. They were the type that kept you guessing at what they held. And even though she had a mouth full of rotten teeth, she kept a wicked smile planted on her face. Whenever Mystic Cyan stepped away from the girl a moment too long, Francis would steal over and exchange a few words with the skinny thing.

“Chile, you don’t get bored wit her, no? All that yapping about good this, good that. It make me sick just listenin at her. You a smart girl, I see. You gotta a lot of power there too. Who you think give you that power?”

Ma Sabine shrugged.

“I tell you.” She leaned closer towards the girl. Her breath blew hot and funky into her face, ”Well it don’t come from that God she learnin you about. No, you think a god gonna give you some of what he got? That’s foolish thinkin, yeah. If I t’were a god, I wouldn’t be studyin bout givin someone below me any piece of the knowledge I know, yeah. That would put them on the same level wit me, and what sense that make if we all know the same and see the same. Wouldn’t be no purpose of me being god, no?”

Ma Sabine did not give a response she just listened intently.

“No. You know that don’t make no sense, gal. That power in you come from you self. Ain’t nobody put it there but you. You need not listen to that old woman there. She don’t know what she talkin of. You got power, use it for whatever you want. If it be for good fine, if it be for evil fine. That there be yours. Use it how you want. Ain’t no rules to follow. But if I were you, I’d make folks pay. Make them fools come to you, yeah, don’t you be going to them. What it look like for a god to be coming to his servants? No, it be the other way round. They come to you. And they pay you for your help. That be the way I do. I live comfortable. You fool round wit that ole woman there and you’ll be a pauper all your life. Think on it, yeah. Ain’t nobody in they right mind want to be poor.” She heard footsteps, “I go now, but you think on what I say. If you be interested, I show you things she won’t dare show you. I live two buildings down, second floor, ask for Francis if you get lost.” She sped off, but Mystic Cyan knew she had been there.

“You remember what I say, huh? Can’t no human play God. You make Him above mad when you try to step bounds. I know that evil one been here. Don’t you listen to her, no.”

Ma Sabine nodded, but curiosity was stirring within, bubbling over in mounds.

Mystic Cyan sensed this and shook her head, “I can’t decide for you. You gonna do as you want. I can’t help that, but don’t be no fool like Eve, yeah. She listened at that serpent and got herself and all her chillun caught.”

And she was right. The girl did as she pleased. She learned the good along with the evil. She would leave Mystic Cyan, and turn right around and go to Francis, who taught her how to throw curses and bind people up. As time went on her visits to Mystic Cyan became less frequent, and the old woman knew the better, but did not pry. There were just some things you couldn’t teach folks- some life lessons have to be learned through falls. Needless to say, Ma Sabine was still walking a thin line even in her eighties, leaning to one side and then the other- whichever the mood called for. In that boy’s case it was leaning towards the good. She made it her constant effort to warn him, but he was always too afraid to listen.

Age did not curve his fear of her. She remembered the first time she made contact with him and how he just stood in the middle of Main shaking like a leaf. He stumbled his way to that heathen’s house as if she could help him. “What a fool boy.” She thought to herself. “He running right to the arms that could crush him.” She shook her head and went about her way, but she didn’t stop trying to reach him. Sometimes she forced her way into his mind, beckoning him to let her undo what had been done, but he paid her no heed. Sometimes she would make a special trip to Pap’s just to see him. But even at seventeen, the strong as an ox young man that he was, he feared her small presence.

“What you fred of me for, boy?” She spoke to him in whispers.

Acanthus turned whiter than a ghost in her presence.

“The one you should be fred of is the one you snuggle up to.”

Acanthus did not know whom she was referring to, because he had many women.

“Don’t be a fool all your life boy. I been tellin you I can fix it fore things go wrong. You wait too late, and I don’t know if I can fix- maybe, maybe not.”

Acanthus handed her-her bag. He tried to mutter words but could not.

“You know where I live.”

Acanthus nodded.

“I can only tell you the truth when you ready to hear it. I can’t force you to hear what you don’t wanna hear. When you ready, you come to me. I tell all, and fix. You got good heart, but misguided. Come when you ready.”

Acanthus watched her walk off. He was afraid to offer to carry her package home. Something about her always stirred him into a frenzy- no other stranger had ever had quite that effect on him.

Chapter

25

They truly believed she lost her mind- not some of it, but all of it. She was chasing after youth like it was her one and only calling. It started with the fashion magazines. She had asked Pap to place a special order for the New Orleanian, so that she could better keep up with what was en vogue. But Pap told her that those folks couldn't make a special run into their neck of the woods for one measly subscription. But she was not discouraged, mind you, she merely turned herself around and sashayed across the way to the white folk's part of town. After a few words with Mr. Rosenstein, old feelings emerged. He not only put in for Dahlia's subscription but made a note to the carrier to deliver the magazine straight to 1011. She thanked him with a sweet bash of the eye and a coy turn of the lip, then went about her way. He thought the chase was on again, but she had other plans, plans that involved a younger man by the name of Ray, who was frequenting 1011 more than usual as of late. He said that he was coming by to see Acanthus, but more than often he came by when he knew the boy was at work, or with one of his women. This was flattering to Dahlia. It made her feel seventeen again.

Her visits to Rosenstein's Department Store, in the wee morning hours, escalated. The store still did not welcome colored guests, but she of course took full advantage of Mr. Rosenstein's bending of rules. He opened the store to her before the sun even had a

mind to wake up. She had her picks and chooses without the worry of disdaining eyes and turned up noses. She filled her cart with clothes galore, hosiery, hats, and the like, half of which Mr. Rosenstein bought for her himself. She even indulged at the cosmetic counter, where on one occasion she discovered a fuchsia shade of lipstick that made her lips appear as ripe and tempting as a raspberry in full bloom. He of course tried to steal a kiss, but she remained a playful tease, dodging his thin pruned lips and withered hands. It was all a game, the object of which was to keep him guessing and hopeful.

Folks knew she had lost her mind completely when on one Saturday morning, something possessed her to step foot in Irma Jackson's salon. The women stopped their flapping mouths. They looked with cutting eyes at the ginger-haired beauty. She invaded a space that was not meant to be crossed by her kind. What was she doing there? Had she come to cast judgement on their wooly heads? Was she there to mock them for trying to achieve what she already had naturally? Some turned up their lips. Others, by reflex, covered their undone heads. It took a moment before Irma could collect her thoughts. She was working on Miss Johnson's head. Dahlia looked straight to her, as if no one else was in the room. A folded newspaper was in her hand.

"Yes, dear, how can I help you?" Irma finally said.

Dahlia walked towards her.

"Can you make my hair look like this?" She opened the paper to a page bearing a picture of Dorothy Dandridge on a night club stage, dolled up with a marcelled do and a stunning sparkling dress.

Irma studied the picture a moment, then looked up at the doll-faced woman. Her eyes were brimming over with a sadness that bordered on a breakdown. How could she refuse such eyes?

“Yes, I can do it, but you’ll have to wait a spell. I got two more heads after this’n. You can come back at two if you like, or sit and wait. It’s up to you.”

Dahlia smiled, “I’ll wait.”

Irma returned the smile and gave a nod of her head as if surprised by the response, “Good, good. Grab you a seat over there. I’ll get to you as soon as I can.”

Dahlia went to the waiting area, and seated herself on the old tattered brown sofa. It was hard to relax in their midst. The stares and silence were unbearable. An older woman, waiting to get her gray touched up, finally put her at ease.

“So you a fan of Dandridge, yeah?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I think she’s lovely. She got a bright future ahead of her.”

The woman stretched her thin lips a bit and nodded, “Yes, I believe she’s gonna turn heads in Hollywood once the Lord bless her with that big break. I bet you didn’t know she got her start singing gospel a few years back. Had this group with her sister called the Wonder Children. I had a chance to see ’im in action one time at a church function up in Georgia.”

“Yes, she does have a nice voice. I heard her sing one time at The Cotton Club.”

“You been way up north to that place? I heard they don’t let no coloreds in there, ‘cept for them on stage.”

“No, I ain’t never step foot nowhere outside of here and Lafitte, but I heard her on the radio.”

“Oh yes, I see. You a pretty thing. Bet you got men just bothering you everywheres you go. You kinda favor Miss Dandridge yourself.”

Pink surfaced on Dahlia’s cheeks. She gave a shy smile, “I can’t see it, Ma’am, but thank you kindly.”

“What you doing in here, anyways? You got some beau in particular you trying to impress?” The woman continued. Some of the eavesdroppers perked up their ears and raised their eyes at the question. They wanted to hear what Miss Thing had to say. Whose husband or boyfriend did she have her eyes on now?

Dahlia averted the sharp-as-knives stares by returning her attention to her magazine. She flipped through a few pages nervously, and answered the question with a bit of disinterest, “Something like that, I guess.”

“You don’t sound too sure.”

“I guess I’m not.”

“Well, he a lucky fellow whoever he is.”

A woman in the corner made a smug sound. The old woman looked up to see where the sound had come from. She turned back to Dahlia,

“You ain’t too well received here, I see.” The woman said to her in an almost whisper.

Dahlia looked up, “I make it fine.” She sounded more like she was trying to convince herself more so than the woman.

“You ain’t gotta put on no front for me. I felt it when you walked in. I ain’t from around here. I’m just passing through on my ways to see my son and his family. But I can feel these folks give you a hard time. You originally from here?”

“No Ma’am, I’m from cross the creek over in Lafitte. That’s partly why folks don’t take so easily to me. They think I class like them Creoles over there, but I ain’t a bit like that.”

“You good peoples, anybody with eyes can see that.” The woman assured.

“Thank you. I don’t hear that too often.”

Dahlia and the woman talked for some time. Conversation made the wait seem shorter and less of a strain. The woman kept her company even after she got her own hair done. Dahlia felt as though the woman was heaven sent.

“Oh, Miss Laura, don’t let me keep you. I wouldn’t want you to miss your train.”

The woman waved her off, “My train don’t leave till way pass five. I got time to spare, chile. Chatting with you is better than having to sit all alone in that station watching the clock.”

“You want it exactly like hers?” Irma cut in.

“Everything about it except the length, please. I have this thing about cutting my hair.”

“No problem, but I do recommend we snip these split ends.”

Dahlia agreed with a nod of her head, but prayed silently to God that the woman wasn’t the type to get scissor-happy.

The do turned out fine. Irma gave Dahlia a mirror to inspect her craftsmanship. Dahlia loved what she saw. The ginger waves neatly rippled down the sides of her face, resembling the muddy waters of the Mississippi on a sunny day. Dahlia stepped out of the salon, looking and feeling like a stranger.

“Oh honey, you gonna put a bright smile on that fellow’s face.” Miss Laura told her as they walked towards the train station.

She got her fill of looks along the way. Even the good doctor had to do a suave double take as she passed by. The sight of her almost made him want to rewind time, but he was snapped back from that sentiment by the jealous eyes of his wife. She had to clear her throat several times before she could catch his attention. Dahlia paid him no mind, although her heart tugged a bit, that and the fact that she had to catch herself from choking on memories. But other than that she consumed herself in lively talk with the short, stout woman, who made her feel like a princess.

“I tell you darling, if things don’t work out with that fellow of yours, I have a nephew in Georgia, who’d sweep you up in a minute. He’s a looker, I can assure you of that, and I’m not just saying that cause he’s blood.” She gave Dahlia a nudge in the side.

“I’ll have to keep that in mind, Miss Laura.”

“You just make sure you do. Now you have my address, and number. Don’t be a stranger. You welcome there anytime, you and that boy of yours. For the life of me, I can’t see you having a boy that old. Seventeen.” The old woman shook her head, “You don’t look a day over twenty yourself.”

“You too kind, Miss Laura- too kind indeed.”

“I guess when you have’im young they keep you young.”

“I suppose.” Dahlia got lost in a patch of blue, peeking through a petal shaped cloud, “To tell you the truth I hardly see that boy. He either coming in when I’m closing my eyes, or I’m leaving when he’s just opening his.”

“Y’all need to do something about that then. It ain’t good for blood to drift apart, especially mother and child.”

Dahlia was still lost, “Yes, I know.”

“Is there anything that I can do for you? You seem troubled.”

Dahlia shook her head, “Have you ever felt outside of yourself, Miss Laura- like something was pulling you in a direction that you were dead set against going in?” After the words fell out, Dahlia felt a little shocked and embarrassed that she had asked such a thing of a mere stranger, but it was hard to take the words back. Besides that, there was something so soothing about the woman’s presence that put her at ease. It was like she was talking to herself, and not afraid of what spilled out.

Miss Laura pondered the comment, turned it over in her mind like she was mixing cake batter, “Yes, I guess anybody can feel that way, some time. The world spin so fast you can hardly keep up with it.”

When they arrived at the train station, the place was buzzing. It was like a world set in fast forward. Folks were rushing from every direction, voices kept announcing departures over the speaker system, and no one seemed like they had time to even think.

“I hate these places.” Miss Laura announced as she sat her things on a nearby bench. “Do me a favor, hear dear? Check with them folks to see if my train leaving as scheduled. My feet so tired.”

Dahlia did as told, and came back with an answer, “He says everything looks okay. Your train should be here shortly.”

Miss Laura was busy massaging her ankles, “Thank you, dear. You have to forgive me. I get the gout some time- makes walking miserable.”

“You should try soaking in some Epsom Salt and hot water. That’s what my Daddy used to do.”

“Yes, I have to try that.” There was a pause, and then she looked up into Dahlia’s patient eyes, “You and your boy gonna be alright.” It was as if she said as an afterthought, or as if answering a silent question. For the rest of the wait, the two sat silent amidst the busyness. When it was time for her to leave, they exchanged a hug, as if they were two old friends dreading yet another separation. It was a moment that left a sore spot in Dahlia’s heart.

Acanthus was in his own world and getting sick of it fast. He hadn’t even noticed the change in his mother’s appearance. The women were tiring him, all except for one, and she was already promised to another. She told him that she could not love him, not in the way he wanted. She loved him yes, but as a sister would love a brother- nothing more. But he did not want to understand. He was not satisfied with this, and was convinced he could change her mind. Maybe letting loose of the other women would build a case for him, he thought. And this he did, save for one who refused to let go. It was as if she thought he was her very lifeline. The more he grew sick of her sight the more she loved him. She cooked for him, washed his clothes, smothered him with I-love-you stares, and even bathed him. There wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do for him. She even took him to a secret spot, just outside of town, past Ma Sabine’s place. As they got nearer to it, she told him to close his eyes. She snuggled up close to his big strong arm

and guided him along the way.

She made sure she looked her best that day- from powdering her face, to brushing a hint a burgundy across her full lips, to having her sister piece together a floral number that accentuated her ample bottom and finely shaped calves. She even had Irma hot iron some curls into her pageboy do. Acanthus was impressed for a moment's time, but he didn't want to encourage her. He told her that she looked nice, but that she didn't need all of those frills to be beautiful. Her heart sank, but she was not discouraged. The evening was still young.

When they arrived at the destination, she told him to slowly open his eyes. He did as told with a breath of impatience. There before him was a large, monstrosity of a house. It looked like a big mess. He looked to her as if she had lost her mind.

She smiled brightly as if she knew a secret.

"Tell me this isn't what you dragged me down here for? I missed practice for this?"

"I know it don't look like much, but this here is something special."

"To who?"

"Why, Acanthus, this here is a piece of your history. This here is the house your father was building before he left."

The muscles in his jaws tensed, and a vein jumped on the right side of his head. His eyes grew warm, then burning hot, "If you thought that this was gonna put a smile on my face woman, you wrong! I can't believe this." He paced about the worn grass, and looked to the house with eyes that could slit a throat with one glance.

Precious was disappointed that he hadn't seen things her way. Her mouth trembled, and eyes watered. She tried holding a gasp inside, but the soft sound found it's way out.

This only added flames to his fire. He raised his thick voice, "Oh. Don't you start that, no!" He shook his head, and paced faster, "I can't believe you. Don't you know how much I hate that man? He left me and my Ma for dead, and I'm supposed to give a care about this shit he threw together? What were you thinking?"

She managed to say a few words in between gasps, "I just thought, you'd want to see...I don't know...I...was."

"JUST SHUT UP! ALL THAT SNIFFILING AIN'T CALLED FOR." He was on the verge of raising his hand to her, but some force outside of himself wouldn't let him. Instead he walked away and left her standing there. She went numb for a while, but finally found her way to the steps. There she sat, wrapped in nothing but the evening air. The house felt like an empty tomb that seemed to pull her in. But she was not ready to be pulled. A voice within told her that she must do something- something to save the love that was drifting away as fast as a streak of lightning. And she, as with everything in her life as of late, held on tightly to that voice with a strength that could crush a mountain.

Chapter

26

He avoided her as best he could, but she didn't get the message. Instead, his dodging seemed to give her more encouragement to fight for his heart. She left notes with Pap to give to him, but the boy merely threw them away without opening a one. She dropped off lunches and dinner plates too- none of which were ever touched. Madness even brought her to the steps of 1011 one day, when the loneliness got too heavy. Dahlia and Ray were sitting on the steps. Dahlia was in a hot pink number that showed too much skin. Her slender legs were delicately crossed and carelessly thrown about his lap. They were making silly talk and giggling when the mad one stepped up. She looked like a nightmare in broad daylight. Her appearance was enough to halt the duo's intimate moment. Dahlia recognized the burden that hung in the woman's eyes and felt sorry for her. She lifted her legs from Ray's lap, and rested her bare feet cautiously on the warm bottom step.

"Miss Dahlia, I'm so sorry to burden you and your company, but have you seen Acanthus anywhere?"

Dahlia tried to not look at Precious' face, it was one full of pain, with bags so heavy and deep bunched beneath eyes that held no ray of hope. She knew her son had put them there. Miss Ruthie had let the mystery of their affair out long ago. At first she

was angered that a woman of her years was chasing behind her boy, but months of lovemaking with Ray had long since cured her of such prejudice. Looking at the woman before her made her fearful, for this could quite easily be her if she didn't watch herself.

"No Precious, I haven't seen him since this morning. Is there anything I can do for you."

"No, no. I just was looking for him. I had something at the house that needed fixin is all. I'm so sorry to have bothered y'all. Y'all take care."

"Yes, you too." Dahlia replied, softly and sadly, but Precious was gone before she could even finish the statement.

Acanthus had taken to giving Sojourner the time that used to be spent on Precious. On his lunch break, he would go by the bookstore she worked at in the white folks' part of town. He'd adoringly watch her shelve books or assist customers before tapping on the glass to let his presence be known. She would always flash him a lovely smile, and signal that she would be out shortly. Sometimes, if time permitted, they would take their lunch out to Winbush Hills. In the spring, the grass was always cool enough to lie down on. They would lay head to head, looking up and guessing at what the sky held. Sometimes they even made a game of guessing what shapes the clouds were mimicking. In those moments, life seemed simple yet grand. She made him feel whole, and he loved every ounce of that wholeness. He never wanted it to end. But what would he do when she'd have to leave and be joined with the one she promised herself to, or when some

fancy Hollywood agent strolled into town and discovered his hidden jewel? He tried not to think of her leaving, but rather let the warmth of the sun and their touching heal the buried pain. On occasion she would allow him play in her hair. She thought it was strange when he first asked, but as time went on, she grew accustomed to his touch. He gently combed her hair with his thick rugged fingers. His strokes were always smooth and soothing. He made her feel as though she were an angel. Often he reminisced on how he stroked his mother's hair long ago, when she was not weary of his touch.

"I believe you missed your calling, Mr. Fountainbleu." Sojourner often joked with him.

"Oh really? And what would that calling be?" He'd play along with her, already knowing what the answer would be.

"I hear Irma could use some good help in her salon."

"Naw, Mr. Big don't swing that way. Not now, not no day. These hands are for loving." With that he would stroke the tender spot at the back of her head. This always sent chills through her. She shuddered a bit and recoiled.

"Stop that. You know I hate when you do that, Acanthus."

He paid her no mind, and with a crooked smile planted on his face attempted to go one step further by stealing a kiss. His lips always seemed fascinated with the nape of her neck. Her tender brown skin and baby fine hair felt sweet to the touch. But she had too strong of a head on her shoulders to let herself get swept up by his mannish antics. She slapped him away.

"Stop now, you know I don't like when you act like that."

He was never discouraged by her swats and pushes. Someday she would give in, for how could she refuse him? No other woman in town had.

“Alright Miss O’Behr, I’m gonna leave you be, for now. But you and I both know who and what you want. And it ain’t that tight wad fellow you been stringing along.”

“Rutherford is my one and only. You know that.”

“Then why you here with me?” There was a weightiness in his question. He watched her face with anticipation.

She looked to his eyes, and did not like what was there. Perhaps it was the sun that cast a bad light to them that made her feel that way. They left a sting. She grabbed her legs inward to her chest, as she sat beneath the cool grass. She looked away from him, and found comfort in the green, “We’re good friends you know. We have a harmless friendship. Rutherford has come to understand that, at least tolerate it, out of love for me. The least you could do is be man enough not to cross bounds.”

Acanthus never let his eyes leave her. He was always watching and waiting for a sign- maybe a slight blink in the eye, a subtle curve in her lips, a twitch- anything to let him know that she wanted more. That sign would come someday, it had to, and he would be there to watch it unfold when it did.

“Why do you look at me that way? It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Is it a sin to stare at the loveliest thing His hands ever crafted?”

“Oh stop, you sound like a character in one of my scripts, Mr. Melodramatic.”

“Oh I do?” He drew closer to her, close enough to take in her breath, “Well, tell me, what would this character be doing in your script right about now?” He teased her

with his bedroom eyes, and a slight pout of the lip. His breath felt like fire against her skin. The moment gave her goosebumps. She rubbed her arms as if a draft had numbed them. Gently he traced the curves of her face with his finger, lingering a bit too long on her lips. She turned her face away and laid her head upon her folded arms about her knees.

“Maybe it’s best we don’t see each other this way.” She finally suffered up.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, maybe we’ve overstepped the bounds of friendship. I’m starting to think that what Rutherford says is right.” She still was turned away from him, but still felt the sting of his eyes pawing through her.

“What is he right about?”

“Our relations are dangerous. You’re starting to treat me like your girl, and I’m not. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Acanthus fell silent. His thoughts and feelings were swirling with the might of a hurricane.

“Maybe we shouldn’t meet for lunch anymore.”

His silence made her turn and face him. His face looked severe. It made her feel guilty. She wanted to take the words back- anything to erase the haunting image before her.

“Or maybe I’m just overreacting.”

A calm came about him, hope was renewed.

“I’m sorry. I guess I do get carried away with you sometimes...It’s just that you’re not like the others.”

The words were meant as a compliment, but somehow they seemed to wrap about her neck in soft loops. It was a feeling she could not shake.

Chapter

27

There was nothing like the feel of a bat, the smell of rising dust, or hitting a home run. He dreamed, ate, and married himself to baseball. It was the one constant in his life that he had control over. He would play in the big leagues someday, this he convinced himself, even though the big leagues still did not accept Negro players in 1935. He was certain that he would be amongst the first to break across the lines. With this dream heavy in his heart, he practiced even harder. Sometimes his sessions carried over into the deep of night. He would be alone in the field practicing swings and pitches, and showing off to imagined crowds, who doted on his swift and clever plays. They shouted his name beneath the moonlight, and it was the grandest sound in the world. None of his fellow teammates took the game quite as seriously as he did. They played mostly for fun, and a temporary chance to be in the spotlight, that and the mere fact that it was a good way to impress the female sex. But he played with something deeper. He tasted stardom on his tongue, and wouldn't allow anyone or anything to slap that taste away. Often he wore his Josh Gibson prize piece about his head, and dreamed of the day when he'd meet the man face to face again. He would show him what he had become, and thank him for his

divine intervention for saving himself from himself. He gave him something to hope for other than his mother's love, and that in itself was a miracle.

During his late night sessions, he was unaware of the shadow lurking amongst the shades of blackness in the night. Elysian Fields was not very well lit. It was a humble Negro ballpark that looked more like a school courtyard without any frills and thrills. The dim lighting gave Precious the opportunity to watch her young lover without fear of being easily discovered. She was so proud of him. She smiled and clapped softly with each of his triumphs. Sometimes she got carried away and made the mistake of clapping loudly. Acanthus would silence himself and look around, amazed somehow that his imagination was getting away from him. He scanned the darkness to make sure that no one was really there. In those moments Precious held herself tight and still, hoping that his eyes would not detect her presence. She felt fortunate for her blackness of skin that made her blend in so well with the night.

She still could not let go of him and was convinced that they were destined. She stopped sending him notes and leaving him plates since they were getting her nowhere with him, but she started sticking closer to him than any shadow- of course making certain that he did not see her. She followed him everywhere, and had even gone to missing days from work just to keep a closer watch on him. What was even more frightening was that she knew his next move better than he did.

She didn't take too kindly to his rendezvouses with Miss O'Behr. They were getting too close to say that they were just friends. He leaned too close to her in the movie theatre, looked at her with too much dreaming in his eyes, brushed up against her for unnecessary reasons, and played in her hair. This was too much. Something had to

be done. It's funny how graveyard love will make you wish and do almost anything. Her jealousy was as strong and obvious as the girl's fiancé's, who with every passing moment advised her to stay away from the brute.

"Rutherford, I thought you and I had come to some understanding about him."

"I don't understand you. How can you not see that I would be upset? My woman is off parading around town with a whoremonger, and I'm supposed to be cool with that? You got everybody pointing fingers at me, and laughing like I'm some kind of fool. It makes me wonder sometimes."

She released a frustrated blow that made her bang swoop up into the air like a caged bird finally given way to flight, "Tell me not this again. How many times do I have to tell you that there is nothing between us? He is a childhood friend is all- the brother I never had."

"Brothers and sisters aren't that close. There ain't a pair alive that I know that's that close."

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" She looked at him with sorrowful tired eyes- soft tender browns that looked as innocent as those of a child's.

"What have I been telling you to do? Cut ties with him. He's taking advantage of you. Can't you see that? He's no good. He's no good, Sojourner. Why can't you see that?"

She turned from him, as if he had slapped her. She drifted to the parlor window. From her position she could see the sad yellow house across the way. Many a day she had stood at that very window, and watched the interesting duo at 1011. The boy was most fascinating of all. He seemed to love his mother dearly, but that love never seemed

reciprocated. The yellow woman appeared to be a very closed off person, who only came alive when her father, Doctor O'Behr, was around. She noticed this animation on that very night her father brought the woman back from the world of the dead. With closed eyes she pressed her lips against his and put the gathered into a state of shock. Somehow, as strange as it may seem, Sojourner was not angry at the yellow woman for kissing her Daddy and making her mother bubble over with envy. That kiss, to her, seemed like something that was meant to be. A force outside of her father seemed to make the moment happen. It made him uproot his family from their lives of comfort out West, to come to this humble town for that very purpose. He was a man possessed, and didn't even know it, but she did. He was not the same man that she had known from her early beginnings. Maybe it was all of the running, and the reinventions of himself that made him lose touch of who he was. The headhunters never gave him any peace- always kept him looking over his shoulders and sleeping with one eye open. She and her parents were always packed and prepared to run off into the night like runaway slaves.

Sojourner was finally glad that the running had stopped for a while. It felt good to feel grounded in one place. This place would be there final home. Something in her heart told her so. And amidst her stay she was fortunate to gain a friend. But now the man she loved wanted to tear that friendship apart as if it had never been. She wrestled with this choice, for she believed it was her destiny to befriend him and keep him alive, just as it was her father's destiny to bring life to the boy's mother, who had been dead within for so long.

“So what is it going to be, Sojourner? We can't keep going through this.”

“Yes, I know. It’s tearing me apart too.” She was still staring out of the window, eyes transfixed to the little yellow house.

He moved to her, embraced her from behind, and rested his head against hers, “I’m not trying to hurt you. Your intentions are good, and I trust you, but I don’t trust him. He’s a man, Sojourner. And a man of his type has only got one thing on his mind.”

She caressed the sharp spikes of stubble upon his cheek- gently and slowly, “Alright. What if I just cut down some of our visits? How’s that?”

“He’s not going to go for that. I see the way he looks at you, and it ain’t good. With a person like that you have to cut all ties. It’s the only way. I don’t trust that look in his eyes- there’s something shaky about it- it’s not normal.”

“You feel that strongly?”

“My Ma always says follow your first mind.”

She turned that thought over in her mind a moment, and finally sighed words that she never imagined would come from her lips. They were like the words of a stranger that left her feeling empty and numb, but put a smile on Rutherford’s face.

It was not easy closing herself off from him. She had to suck in tears each time she lied to him about not being able to go with him to this place and that place. There would be no more picture shows, intimate talks on the hill, or practice sessions with going over her scripts. Looking into his eyes was hardest of all. They were eyes filled

with too much hurt. There even came a time when she ignored him all together in an effort to avoid his eyes. It made him feel invisible. He didn't like feeling that way, for it resurrected spirits he thought he had long since buried...

Part III

There was too much pink in the sky for comfort. It had been that way all week. The days would begin with a crisp azure blue, but by evening the sky bled with a cutthroat pink. Folks in Backwaters thought there was cause for worry. A sky like that wasn't normal, especially not four days in a row. There were those who tried to guess what was coming- a few speculated it had something to do with Precious leaving those two days and coming back looking and acting like a new woman. But most kept silent and closed off, because a sky like that was nothing to play with.

Chapter

28

He felt outside of himself. Maybe it had something to do with that sky. He wasn't sure. The only thing he was certain of was that this was all strange. Old habits reemerged. He started drifting back into long periods of sleep. It was not like him to miss work or even be late. Pap was concerned. He came to the boy's Ma to set things straight. It was in the early morning when he came to her. A bit of dreaming and sleep still lingered in her midnight blues. She hugged the top of her white robe to her bosom. Despite her recent school girl antics with frolicking around with Ray, she was still a lady.

"I'm so sorry to be botherin you, Miss Dahlia, so early, but where is that boy of yours? It ain't like him to be late."

"Oh, Mr. Pap. I'm so sorry. He must still be in bed. Let me go see if I can rustle him up for you."

She closed the door softly and went to the boy's room. She found him lying there looking up at the ceiling. She felt as if she was invading some private moment. He didn't even notice her entrance into the room.

"Canthus, 'Canthus..." She called to him in a hushed tone, but he did not hear her. She moved closer to him, hand still clenching her robe. His eyes were wide open,

but had a distant look about them. She leaned over to inspect them a little further. A knot surfaced in her throat, memories swirled like a whirlwind, she was afraid. He looked dead. Water stung her eyes, reflex drew her hand to her mouth. It couldn't be. Regret hung heavy on her. Gently she rubbed his face. Her touch seemed to erupt something in him. He awakened and grabbed her fiercely and slung her against the wall. She was in a state of shock. She didn't know whether to cry tears of joy because he had arisen, or to slap him senseless for manhandling her that way. When he realized what he had done he went to her.

"Oh Mama. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Somebody was chasing me in my dream, and then I woke up and you were there over me..I'm so sorry." He helped her to her feet.

"It's alright. I guess I would've done the same if I woke up and found somebody breathing over me. You best get yourself washed and dressed. Pap out there."

He grabbed his watch from the nightstand, "Oh hell- not again. He gonna let me go for sure." He rushed for his pants, and dug into a pile of clothes on the floor in search of a clean shirt.

"Is there something going on I should know about?" She asked him. Something was not right, she could feel it- call it mother's intuition.

"No nothing, Mama- nothing to concern yourself about." Having found an unsoiled shirt, he thrust himself into it.

The mother in her could not let him go out of the house looking like some man off of the street, "Let me knock the wrinkles out of that thing."

"No time, Mama."

“You can’t go out looking like that. Come on. It won’t take but a minute.”

“No time.” He hurried over to the closet to find some shoes. She followed behind him and tried peeling the shirt off. He revved back at her, and spoke to her in a voice she did not recognize, it bubbled over like a pot of boiling water, “I SAID I DON’T HAVE TIME!”

She was so out done that she left the room in tears. He didn’t go after her, but like a man possessed, tore into that closet to scavenge for a matching pair of shoes.

By the time he was dressed, his Ma was in the doorway talking to Pap. He brushed past her. She felt a chill that made her hug her robe even tighter to herself. Pap just stared at the boy as if he were a stranger.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Pap. I don’t know what’s gotten into me lately. It won’t happen again.”

Pap just nodded, “Well Miss Dahlia, been good talkin to ya. I’ll see you around.” The old man made his way down the steps and the younger one followed. It was odd that Acanthus didn’t turn to bid her goodbye. She felt like a prized jewel that was discarded. She was now more certain than ever that there was cause for concern- so much so that it brought her to the good doctor’s doorstep that very afternoon.

Mrs. O’Behr did not welcome her with open arms. She stood at the door like a bear, and examined the younger woman’s face suspiciously. She did not trust those fuchsia colored lips.

“He’s in his office. What can we help you with?” She finally said, putting extra emphasis on the “we”.

“Oh, not to insult you, Mrs. O’Behr, but it’s a matter that I need to discuss with

the doctor. It's quite urgent."

The round woman turned her lips and rolled her eyes, but finally unlatched the screendoor. She could see that no amount of sternness could turn the slight woman away.

"Have a seat in the parlor. I'll get him for you."

"Thank you kindly." Dahlia removed her pillbox hat as she entered the home. Mrs. O'Behr led her to the parlor, then retreated to the back of the house. She returned shortly with the doctor at her side. He looked puzzled. Dahlia arose with his entrance. She looked to him as if he could solve all of her problems. It was a painful stare, so much so that he had to avert his eyes from it.

"You can leave us, Adell." He finally announced.

His wife left with reluctance, not however before casting an iron eye on the unwelcome guest, "I'll be in the library if you need me."

He nodded and waved her away. Dahlia was still standing, eyes transfixed to him. He rubbed his lips out of nervousness.

"What? - Can't look at me?" She asked.

"What can I do for you, Miss Fountainbleu?" He still did not look at her. He withdrew the spectacles from his eyes, and cleaned them with the tip of his shirt. Dahlia continued to look at him in a way that made him uncomfortable. It was as if she was looking through him, and had seen something that he had hidden within- something that wasn't meant to be seen by anyone's eyes except his own.

She didn't mean to look that way at him- that was just her nature. She stared hard at people without ever realizing it.

"I apologize if my being here makes you uncomfortable, but I need your help- or

rather my son needs your help.”

He put his spectacles back on, and this time looked to her- only now she was looking to the floor. There was a heavy blueness in her voice.

“His sleeping spells are starting again....I thought we were free from those things. I hadn’t had one myself since...well, since that flood. What was it, ’27? Don’t seem that long does it? Eight years. Where did time go?” She raised her head and looked to him. She clenched her hat. She had to do something with her hands, otherwise she would use them to tear into him, for he was the second man who ate her heart and spat it out like it was the worst thing he had ever tasted.

He wanted to go to her, hold her- erase the tears that were now seeping from the corners of her eyes. A lump grew in his chest and rose to his throat.

“Yes, it does get away from you, doesn’t it? What can I do for you and your son?”

She dabbed her eyes with the back of her hand, ”Oh, would you just look at me. Ain’t this a woman for you- tears and all?” She smiled to keep from breaking into madness.

He moved to her, and withdrew from his pocket a handkerchief. He smiled as he helped wipe the tears away.

“There, there. I’m going to do what I can to help you.”

“Help him.”

“Yes, him.”

Their eyes locked. The years had been good to him, she finally admitted to herself. Yes, he was a little grayer and there were more crows feet about his eyes than

she remembered being there, and he had grown thick in a few places- but the years had been kind.

To him, she looked a bubble of youth- the same schoolgirl vision she was years ago when they almost had something. Reunions were unsettling for him. He tried to have as little contact with them as possible because they resurrected things that were long since buried and done away with. Here and now was all that mattered, or was it?

“What can be done? He’s not acting like himself. I’m a bit afraid.” She was talking in whispers, “That boy’s got a temper like I don’t know what. You know it- you’ve seen it. I haven’t seen him this angry since he ran you off.” She searched his face for an answer.

He gently rubbed her arms to assure her that all was not lost. There was a stir in the hallway, soft steps. He pushed himself from her, but his eyes could not, or rather would not leave her baby blues. A head full of bouncing curls peeked around the corner.

“Daddy?”

He turned at the sound of the sugarcoated voice.

“Pumpkin, come in.”

“You sure?” She asked as she peeled herself away from her shield. She came directly to his side as if they were drawn by magnets. She hugged at his waist as she nodded hello to Dahlia. He drew her in as if she was all that he had.

“You know Miss Fountainbleu, don’t you, Darling?”

“Yes, how silly of you to ask, Father.” She playfully hit him. “How are you this evening, Miss Fountainbleu? My Pops taking good care of you ?”

“He’s trying his best.” Dahlia assured.

“Well if you got any kind of ailment, this one can tear it out. He got the gift of healing, ain’t that right, Papa?

“‘Isn’t’- you best be lucky your Ma’s not around to hear you butcher the English language like that.”

“Oh, don’t I know it. That woman’s a walking Grammar book if I ever seen any.”

“I see you got your costume make-up on- who are you tonight?”

“Why, Daddy, can’t you tell? I’m Opehlia.” She swooned dramatically, and gave him her best dejected stare. “Yes, I’m the tragic Ophelia- damsel in distress- so saddened by the state of my life that I drown myself in the pond of life, that I might have life. Only tonight my pond is going to be Mrs. Toliver’s washtub.” She laughed to herself.

“Dahlia, you must forgive my daughter. She’s an actress.”

“Not an actress, a thespian.” She corrected.

“Oh yes, a thespian.”

“We’re performing Hamlet tonight down at the community center. If you’re not busy, Miss Fountainbleu- you’re welcome to come.”

“I just may. Hamlet is one of my favorites.”

“Good then- I hope to see you there. If you want to get a good seat, come by six thirty. Alright, I’m off Daddy. I just wanted to say goodbye before I go.” She planted a delicate kiss upon his cheek and whirlwinded herself out of the room and up the stairs to finish dressing.

Doctor O’Behr was grinning from ear to ear.

“Lovely girl.” Dahlia commented.

“Yes, the center of my heart.” He thought on his words a moment, but Dahlia’s

soft breathing brought him back to the case at hand, "Now then, we must do something about your son."

Dahlia nodded.

"As I tried explaining to you years ago, his condition is a serious matter. I have a prescription that I would like you to try on him. I can't make any guarantees, but this will be our first step." He went to a near by desk and scribbled some information on a small sheet of paper, "Does he seem like he would be willing to take any medication?"

Dahlia hesitated with an answer. Her silence made him look up and over to her. She clenched her hat tighter.

"Well?"

"I never told him about his condition, Doctor. I guess, in my heart, I didn't want to believe your diagnosis. He hasn't had any problems with it till now."

"Dahlia, you should have told him. This isn't something you should hide."

"Please, no lectures."

The doctor returned his attention back to the piece of paper. He jotted down some more information and handed to her, "Maybe I should sit down and talk with him about it."

"No, no- I'll talk with him. Maybe it's best he hears it from me, and not a stranger." She took the piece of paper and held it as if it was the heaviest thing she ever held, "Thank you for your time." She tried at a smile.

Something moved him to grab hold of her hand. He could feel traces of the burn scar he nursed years back. He gently caressed the ridges with his thumb, "You take care, hear?"

She nodded.

“Send him my way, if need be.”

She nodded once more. Her mind was telling her to move, but her heart was screaming at her to stay. His seemed to be yelling the same, for he did not let go of her hand. Time seem suspended, but reality crept in. Across the room was a wedding portrait. The sight sank into her heart like a hook- then gently, very gently she let loose of his hand, and drifted to the front door, not once looking behind. He watched her walk off- even found himself drawn to the screendoor, where he watched her safely cross the street, walk past her leaning fence, up those wobbly steps, unto that creaking porch, and past the splintered white door.

Chapter

29

Anyone who saw him that day could attest to the flames in his eyes. He threw a look on customers that sent them scrambling for their bags, and whispering prayers to their Maker. Some even left without getting their change. Others dodged his stare as much as possible, and were suspicious of his mechanical smile. He however was not aware of the presence of the flames, and thought it odd that people were reacting differently towards him. It made a nervousness resurface in him that had been buried since his youth. He became so overwhelmed that his hands started to fidget. Voices told him ugly things. They told him he was nothing, that he was unloved, that everyone was out to get him. By mid-afternoon, he was in such a frenzy that he couldn't look at another face, for there was none amidst him whom he could trust. He was even shy around Precious.

She came into the store with a fierce confidence. It seemed stronger than a mountain, and as false as fool's gold. She was draped in a red silk number that hugged at every curve. As she walked, she pushed against space as if it had dubbed her its sole heir. There was talk amongst the gathered men on the storefront- wagging of tongues,

bulging of eyes, and every attempt to keep their spirits from rising. They looked at her as if she was the dead come back to life, but Acanthus could not look at her. He didn't even lift his head when she hovered over him with that soft Azalea scent rising from her half-exposed bosom. She took his hand into her own and stroked it firmly.

"I've been missing somebody." She said in her most seductive tongue.

He cringed a bit at the sound. This was not the type of reaction she was fishing for, but she smiled all the same and continued stroking.

"Come by to see me this evening, when time permits. No strings attached." She purred.

Something beyond his understanding made him nod.

She smiled a crooked smile, "Good. I will make it worth your while." With that said, she lifted his face, looked dreamily into his eyes, and planted her scarlet lips against his own. Hers felt consumed with fire. He recoiled and rubbed away the sting. She laughed a bit, then sashayed off- twirling her hobbyhorse as if it were some magic piece.

When evening fell, he hurried home. He rushed past his mother as if she wasn't even there. She followed him. They needed to talk, but he was not much in the mood for talking. He had somewhere to go, someone to meet. What was broken had to be fixed- lest he perish.

"Canthus, did you hear me? I said we have some things to discuss." She pleaded. But her voice to him was like a nagging mosquito buzzing at his ear. He waved her away.

“Mama, I don’t have time. I got to go.” He grabbed a towel and his back brush, then went outside to get some bath water from the pump. She was at his side like a shadow.

“Baby please, this is urgent. I been waiting for you all day.”

“Can’t it wait till I get back?” He threw the towel over his bare shoulders. The evening sky saturated him with pink. It made his yellow skin look as though it were on fire- as if something was bubbling within, screaming to get out.

She reached to touch him, but he shuddered even before her hand could reach his flesh. He shoved her hand away. For some odd reason he did not want her touching him. He grabbed his buckets of water and rushed up the back porch steps and into the house. She followed.

He poured the water into the washtub, and began undressing in front of her without any shame. She turned her head in shock. With vigor, he began washing himself. She left him to his business, intent on returning to finish the conversation once he was decent. She went into the parlor and rested herself on the sofa. The radio sang to her in soft drones. It whipped her into a deep sleep. By the time she awakened the sky was black, and her boy was long gone. She rushed out into the night in search of him.

She had done justice to her portrayal of Ophelia, that delicate femme fatale. This was obvious because the audience gave her a standing ovation. Some even met her backstage to swarm her with hugs and kisses. Amongst the gathered stood one who sent

her heart to throbbing. It was Acanthus. He was looking his best, almost a carbon copy of the one she gave her heart to. His being there was unsettling. She turned and retreated to her dressing room. He slivered his way through the crowd. They parted as if he were Moses himself, casting his staff. Once at the door he tapped lightly upon it with the back of his hand. She was on the other side, back leaned against the door- waiting for and expecting the knock. She took in deep breaths, and rested her hand against her chest. He tapped again and again. Finally after the fifth tap, she gained enough courage to give him a response.

“Yes?”

She could hear him lean his head against the door. Something blue laced his voice, “It’s me. We have to talk.”

She paused, and looked up at the ceiling as if offering a prayer.

“Sojourner-“

“I can’t see you, Acanthus. You know what we discussed. It’s best this way.”

“Best for who?” He asked. His ear was now pressed to the door. He could hear her soft breathing-it was a sound that almost stopped his heart.

“So it’s come to this? Our friendship meant that little to you? What did I do?”

Slowly the doorknob turned. The lock slid out of place, and he became hopeful. She cracked open the door sufficient enough to see half of his face. It was if she was looking at him for the very first time. He looked different, this made her feel all the more unsettled.

“I brought you a little something.” He said with shy eyes and a slight smile.

She looked down at his hand. He held a Magnolia. She could feel a tug at her heart. Magnolias were her favorite. She almost smiled but didn't, "You really shouldn't have."

"I wanted to. You were wonderful up there- very convincing."

"I try."

"Come take a walk with me."

"I can't. Rutherford's taking me to dinner across the creek. He stepped out a moment but he'll be back, and I don't want you two..."

"Letting a man rule you isn't the Sojourner I know."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Her eyebrows drew in.

"You know as well as I do that he's the one that tore us apart. I know you didn't want to end us." He licked his lips, and grew more nervous by the minute. His hands started fidgeting. He had to do something with them. Shakily he handed her the flower. She drew back as if afraid, but recomposed herself and cautiously reached out for it. One hand stayed at rest on the doorknob.

He was embarrassed by his trembling hands, and quickly slid them into the soothing coolness of his pockets. His eyes began to water. His mouth tried to tell her something but could not.

"Thank you." She said as an afterthought.

He nodded, and waited for something more. But that something he was waiting for was something she could not give him. Having realized this, as if it were some harsh slap across the face, he turned and walked away, like a dog with its tail tucked between

its legs. She let loose of the doorknob and held the flower with both hands. She drew it to her nose. It radiated a divine smell that weakened her.

“Wait!” She called out to him.

He lifted his head and turned. She advanced towards him.

“I guess a walk won’t hurt. It’d be good to get some fresh air.” She sounded as if she was trying to convince herself of something.

Their walk amidst the hanging darkness led them to Elysian Fields, a place he held sacred. They sat in the stands. There was a chill in the night air that cut through her. She vigorously rubbed her arms to soothe away the goosebumps. He took off his dinner jacket and draped it about her. But she was still cold. The moonlight danced across her face- adorned her with its glow. Her visage was moving to him. She seemed the closest thing to an angel. He couldn’t resist confessing all to her. He laid his heart on a platter, and didn’t care about the consequences.

When he told her that he loved her from the start, it made her go numb. Her body felt like a tub of jelly. He was drawn to her, held her hand, and moved his lips to a place they had never attempted to go before- to hers. For a moment’s time she didn’t put up a fight, but once her mind got a hold of her heart, she withdrew from him.

“No!” she said, and shook her head to further affirm this.

“No?”

“No.” She shook her head once more.

He almost accepted this, had it not been for her wiping his kiss from her lips with the back of her hand as if it were some dirty something. In that moment something surged through him. He grabbed her fiercely, gathered her hair into his thick hands and

pulled her lips back to his own. He kissed her too hard for it to be mistaken for passion. She tried to fight him off. He bit her lip and tasted blood. He let go of her. The force of him letting her go threw her back. Her head hit the stands. She grabbed it to soothe the pain.

“What’s gotten into you- are you crazy?!”

He was like a man possessed. Her words shot a wound in his heart that surpassed the pain that her actions left. He felt outside of himself. As he stood, a new power raced through him. He looked down at her as if she were nothing. She silenced her tongue and scooted further away.

His voice rang out like an exploding bomb, “WHAT DO YOU BITCHES WANT? A MAN CAN GIVE YOU HIS HEART, EAT A POUND OF YOUR SHIT AND TREAT YOU BETTER THAN GOD HIMSELF, AND YOU STILL CAN’T LOVE US? AND I’M THE ONE THAT’S CRAZY?”

Tears plummeted from her eyes. She had never heard such words come from his lips. He was always so gentle with her. She wanted to break out and run, but she couldn’t feel anything, save for the pounding of her heart, and even that she tried to silence for fear that he might hear it.

He nervously rubbed his soft-as-silk hair. His conscience got the best of him. He fell to his knees, as if bowing before the altar of some great god. Tears consumed him. He crawled to her. She eased away with his every advance until she had reach the edge of the row.

“Baby, oh, Baby...I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean those things. Please, please, forgive me, Sojourner. I would never do anything to purposely hurt you.”

She looked over the edge, then back to him, then to the edge again. He lunged and grabbed her leg. She tried shaking him off, while maintaining her balance.

“Let me go, Acanthus. I just want to go home.”

“I love you, Sojourner. Can’t you see that.” He buried his face in her leg. His tears burned through her like acid.

“I want to go home, Acanthus- please let me go.”

“I can’t. My heart goes wherever you go.”

She suffered up a sigh loud enough to wake the dead. It was a last-hope cry. He got to his feet and pulled her to himself. She and her little fists tried to fight him off, but he was too strong. He hugged her like a bear.

“Say you love me, Sojourner. It’s not that hard.”

“No.”

“Say you love me, I know you do. I won’t tell, just say you love me, please say you love me.” He pleaded.

“No!”

“Stop fighting your feelings.”

“I don’t love you!”

“SAY YOU LOVE ME!”

“I don’t love you that way! And I think you’re a monster for doing this to me. I thought I knew you, Acanthus. What’s gotten into you? You’re not acting like yourself.”

He fumbled in his pocket and withdrew a pocketknife. It gleamed in the moonlight. He held it to her cheek. She shivered. Softly he rubbed it against her flesh. Her body went limp.

“SAY YOU LOVE ME, DAMN IT!”

“NO!” She roared back.

He looked into her eyes, and searched them for the answer he knew was there. In that moment softness resurfaced in his tone, “Baby, say what you mean. I don’t care if you marry him, but say what you mean, and I’ll let you go.”

She looked at him sharply and hated him for what he was doing to her. She searched his face for traces of the boy she once knew. He was there somewhere- hiding. For a moment, one split moment she felt sorry for him, but she could not confess what wasn’t in her heart. She was reminded of the knife. She felt its coldness against her cheek. She hardened.

“I don’t love you that way, Acanthus- not that way...not that way.”

There was silence- a deadening silence, and then silver tore into flesh. His hand moved like lightning, and her voice drifted into the night. Seeing red was not enough for him. He had to see her heart- had to hold it, had to caress it—had to press it against his own.

Chapter

30

They could not revive him. It was his Ma who found him in the stands cuddled up to the dead one. Her face was sliced in ways unimaginable. A puncture wound, no larger than an inch, lay in the center of her chest- blood flowed from it like a river. He was breathing, but looked deader than the one lying there limp in his arms. He didn't make his way to her heart- something held the knife back and wouldn't let him go that far. He tried to bring her back- tried blowing his breath into her, but she did not respond. It was too late. All he could do was hold her, and pray for forgiveness but expect none.

The authorities couldn't wake him, nor could they decide whether to put him in a cell, straitjacket, or coffin. But finally they settled with putting him in a cell, considering that the girl was dead and he was still breathing. His sleeping spell lasted all of twenty-eight days, six hours, thirteen minutes, and fourteen seconds. Everyone was keeping time- watching and waiting for justice to be served. The first thing he asked for was Ma Sabine- not a bath, mind you, nor a meal, nor a drink of water, or even his Mama, but a little woman who lived on the edge of town, a little woman whom anyone with any sense feared. It was time to know.

She wobbled in on her one good leg, with her purse held tight to her person. She looked like a tiny ink spot next to the tall white officer- a harmless old lady to the naked eye. Her eyes stayed fixed to the boy from the moment she walked in. It was if they were holding their very own private conversation. Dahlia was at her side. She helped seat her on a nearby bench. The officer unlocked the cell. The boy looked and smelled like a nightmare.

“You got thirty minutes.” The officer grunted as he gave the boy an evil eye, “We don’t want no trouble out of you, nigger. You make one false move and them guards at the door will be on you like hot potatas, hear?”

Acanthus nodded.

“I said did you hear me?” The pink officer grabbed him by the collar, “I don’t understand sign language!”

“Yes, Sir.”

The officer released him from his grip, and darted a chilling stare over to the two seated women, then left the room with an air of haughtiness.

Acanthus pulled up a chair. He sat facing the old woman, waiting for her to speak.

“This could have all been avoided, you know.” She finally said, eyes dead center on his face. “I tried to help you before it came to this.”

Acanthus buried his head into his hands. Dahlia looked from one to the other, unsure of what to make of their connection.

“It wasn’t all your fault though. Don’t put it all on you. You too trusting.”

His head shot up at her comment. His eyes were full of question marks.

“You don’t know the company you keep, no. That one you kept running to had evil in her heart.”

“No, no, you don’t know what you talking about. My Sojourner...”

“Not her fool, that other one.”

Acanthus tried to search his mind for a face, he looked to his Ma, but she didn’t have any answers.

“What? Don’t tell me you don’t know who.” Ma Sabine snapped.

“I got around, Ma’am- there were many.”

Ma Sabine gave a turn of her lip. “That one that you ran to when you and your Ma was at odds, that one who took your manhood away. Now you know?”

“Precious?”

“Yes, but precious she ain’t. She had you fixed boy. You and your Ma.”

“What do you mean?” Dahlia cut in.

“I mean just what I say. She had you and him bound, but she didn’t act alone. She and Madame Fountainbleu came to me. They wanted you and that one you loved more than yourself to be split apart.”

Dahlia’s throat tightened.

“But that ain’t the all of it, no. That Precious, she came back for more. She put another fix on you- she put enmity tweenxt your seed and that boy’s father’s seed. That’s how come the love tweenxt you and your son ain’t never had a chance to be right.”

“But why? I never did her a thing. I barely know her.” Dahlia cried, “And my own mother?”

“You loved the same man. You had what she claimed for her own. She wanted to set things right.”

“Right?” Heat was rising, thoughts were swirling. Dahlia couldn’t breathe. She had to get up. She paced the floor frantically. Acanthus arose and went to her. He tried to hold her, but she did not want to be held.

“Leave her be, chile. Come, sit, Sabine ain’t finished.”

Acanthus did as told, but kept a watchful eye on his hurting Ma.

“She got over him, your father. But something unexpected happened. She fell for you, and you did just as your father did. You didn’t acknowledge her love- you didn’t return it. So she had to do something before it got too bad.”

The boy now turned his full attention to the old woman.

“She was gone them two days- didn’t tell a soul where she was going, but I know. She went to The City. She got one of them low down dirty papas to bind you up again. She wanted that girl out of the picture, out of your heart so there’d be room for her, but it was another wish gone wrong....That’s the trouble wit people. Most don’t know how to ask for what they really want- they dance around the issue, hoping God or fate, or whatever else up there will fill in the blanks. But that ain’t the way it work, no.”

Acanthus buried his head into his hands, ”I think we’ve heard enough.”

“No you haven’t. Don’t get smug wit me. I been told you I could’ve fixed it, but you wouldn’t let me.”

“WHY THE HELL DID YOU BIND ME UP IN THE FIRST PLACE, IF YOU KNEW IT WAS WRONG?” He roared. One of the guards poked his head in.

“Everything alright in there?”

Dahlia nodded. The officer was not satisfied with her answer, and lingered a bit. Acanthus' hands were burning. He had to do something with them. They found their way to the jail cell. He clung to the bars hopelessly.

"What's with him?" The officer asked.

"He's fine."

He looked over to the drooping boy suspiciously, then to his Ma, then to the old black woman with the knowing eyes. Slowly he walked back to his position outside of the door.

"I just do what people ask me to do. I didn't make the rules. You think I asked to know the things I know?"

"But you should know right from wrong." Acanthus retorted. The words flew from his mouth before he could even think.

"Oh really? And how is it that you can't make out the difference yourself?" She asked, eyes burning through his turned back, "It must be wonderful to sleep and forget. Maybe I ought to try that sometime- see how it work."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it came out." He turned and faced her, and tried at best to look sincere.

"Come sit." She advised.

He obeyed. His mother was still pacing the floor.

"How is he?" Dahlia burst out, with a tad bit of hope resurfacing in her eyes.

"He dead, chile. Died not too long after Precious and your Ma run him off. He loved you to the end, but he died a coward's death- hung himself on a tree. He couldn't face the world without you."

Old tears erupted. Dahlia was shaking. Acanthus refrained from getting up and going to her aid, for he did not want to get turned away again.

“He alright, chile. Unsettled spirits have a way of living again. They latch on to living folks that feel as dead as they are. His spirit on that doctor friend of yours. That’s how come you fell for him so deep.”

Dahlia was quiet. The room grew quiet.

“I can reverse the fixes-all three of them, with your permission, but you still gotta pay your debt, boy. That girl dead cause of you. I can’t save you from your debt, but I can unbind you so you can have peace in that world beyond.”

Acanthus nodded his already hung head. Ma Sabine turned to get confirmation from Dahlia. She nodded as well with a face full of tears.

“Yes, do what you must.”

Do what you must, do what you must--- Those words echoed in her mind, looped about her brain and drug her to the doorstep of Precious Dolby’s home. She had some things of her own to settle, and she didn’t need some spell to help her along the way. She would handle it like a woman. Murder was on her mind- a life for a life. But there was no answer to her insistent knocking. She knocked harder, but still no answer. She beat the door in, and tore into that place like a mad woman. It was unkept and smelled foul. Precious was not in the parlor, nor in her bedroom, but she was in the kitchen. Her arms and legs hung from the wash tub. Her face was immersed in water. She looked as

though she was peacefully resting her head back, enjoying a good soak. Dahlia yanked her head up, and called her out of her name but she did not stir. She was dead.

The trial went on for weeks. The prosecutor argued that it was a clear case of premeditated murder, and in so many terms advised that the town had better kill that nigger before he got his hands on one of their white women. The defense pressed that it was temporary insanity that led to what transpired, and were shooting for the jury to commit him. But in the end, the twelve white faces agreed with the prosecutor- that nigger had to be stopped before he went too far. And so it was announced. The set date of execution was June 4, 1935.

Chapter

31

She prepared his head for the execution, gliding the razor gently from the tip of his forehead, to the crown, then to the nape. His hair fell in thick clumps to the floor- each fall left an echo in her heart. When he was just a boy, she would gather him close to herself and take special care with dabbing olive oil on each strand of his hair. Those moments made him feel safe. Her legs locked him in as he sat patiently on the floor. They were like protective gates, warding off all harm. But now they couldn't offer any protection. Silence held mother and child, as it had so many times before. Words could not fill the space. Silence was a known- it offered comfort that words could not.

The hair continued to fall. Each descent made the lump in her throat double. He could hear her behind him, holding back tears and imagined how the light hit her face. Such a beautiful face- he had worshipped it all of his life. He raised his hand to caress her wet cheek. The touch assured her that everything would be alright- the worst had passed. Her hands began to tremble. The razor fell. Their hands scrambled to pick it up, touching in the silence. Finally she retrieved it and commenced where she left off.

Once finished, she wiped the loose strands from his neck. Her lips somehow found their way to the crown of his head and lingered there a bit. A guard came in and announced that it was time for him to get his last meal squared away, a meal which his Ma had prepared and brought to the jailhouse earlier. Her sister helped her cook the crawfish etoufee, and Miss Ruthie lent her hands with the greens. He scoffed it down along with the garlic bread Charletta Mae made, and finished it off with candied yams. Each spoonful made the room grow tighter. The reality of being closed in a small box finally hit him. He could hardly breathe. He held on to his Ma's hand with a firm grip. She squeezed his back.

"Did you remember to bring my things?" He was referring to his Josh Gibson cap, baseball bat, glove, and ball. He wanted to be buried with them.

"Yes, I gave them to one of the guards."

He squeezed her hand tighter, "I thought it would be easier the sooner it came, but now I'm starting to second guess." He tried a smile.

"It'll be over quicker than a blink. Just say a prayer as you go. You remember the one the priest told you to recite- the one to Our Lady?"

He nodded and hung his head a bit. She lifted his chin and looked into his eyes.

"No worries, now. You done confessed all. He knows the inner workings of your heart, you gone be fine- just fine."

Her smile lifted his heart.

"I know I wasn't the best," She continued, "but know that you were loved."

He nodded.

"I loved-love you too, Mama. Always have."

“Yes, I know- that was never a mystery.”

A guard entered the room. The door fell heavy behind him. It was time.

Epilogue

The world is full of unsettled spirits, faceless souls in need of latching onto what has been, and what was hoped to be. Some never stop wandering, but then there are others who are fortunate enough to catch hold of those living ones whom seem more dead than alive. Together they discover the paths that have been there all the long.

By God's grace, Acanthus just happened to be one of those fortunate ones----

VITA

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